



Ismat Chughtai, Progressive Literature and Formations of the Indo-Muslim Secular, 1911-1991

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*Ismat Chughtai, Progressive Literature
and Formations of the Indo-Muslim Secular, 1911-1991*

A thesis presented

by

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to

The Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

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**Ismat Chughtai, Progressive Literature
and Formations of the Indo-Muslim Secular, 1911-1991**

This dissertation examines the life, work, and contexts of noted Urdu writer and Indian cultural critic Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991). By engaging in readings of Chughtai's texts and contexts, this dissertation presents the first study of its kind, examining Indian secular thought through the lens of an Urdu literary figure. As such, this dissertation offers new perspectives on intersections between popular culture and political and religious thought in modern India through the lens of a celebrated literary figure whose legacy continues to be invoked. I argue that, at its core, Chughtai's critique of society hinged upon the equality (*barābarī*) of all Indians. The primacy of "humanity" (*insāniyat*) over other identities was the keystone of her formation of the secular, and has roots in a tradition that can be termed Islamicate humanism. In the first chapter, "Sacred Duty: Ismat Chughtai's Cosmopolitan Justice between Islam and the Secular," I argue that, by rejecting the inferior status of women within Muslim legal codes, Chughtai pursued what she saw as moral equality to a more radical degree than the postcolonial Indian state, which enshrined separate codes of personal law based on religious community. Ultimately, the secular ideals of equality, autonomy and human dignity were the mainstays of her thought, without regard to whether these were pursued through "Islamic" means. In the next chapter, "The Personal is Political: Economic and Sexual Progress in Modern India," I argue that Chughtai, unlike other members of the Progressive Writers' Movement, emphasized the link between hierarchical economic injustice and limitations on autonomous sexual choice. In the third chapter, "Reform, Education, and Woman as Subject," I argue that in her writing, particularly the novel *Terhī Lakīr*, Chughtai deployed narratives of education as foundational to the formation of an emancipated girl, one who liberates herself by rejecting the "old rules" (*purānī qānūn*). The fourth chapter, "The Many Lives of Urdu: Language, Progressive Literature and Nostalgia," explores the fate of the Urdu language and Chughtai's legacy in independent India. Ultimately, this project calls into question assumptions regarding what types of textual and human subjects are considered representatives of "Indo-Muslim Culture" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Table of Contents | iv |
| Acknowledgments | v |
| Note on Transliteration and Translation | viii |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Biography..... | 6 |
| Ismat Chughtai in Urdu Studies and Beyond..... | 9 |
| Chughtai as Secular Critic | 15 |
| Structure of Project | 19 |
| 1. Sacred Duty: Ismat Chughtai’s Cosmopolitan Justice between Islam and the Secular .. | 23 |
| Islamicate Humanism and the Multiple Strands of Secular Thought in South Asia | 28 |
| The World of the Heart: Chughtai and the Tradition of Islamicate Humanism | 36 |
| Indian Muslims and the Secular State..... | 44 |
| Beyond Islam | 50 |
| Indian Roots and Communal Winds of Partition..... | 56 |
| Secular Resistance in Sacred Duty (“Muqaddas Farz,” 1983) | 62 |
| Irreverent to the Last: The Funeral of Ismat Chughtai | 64 |
| Conclusion | 69 |
| 2. The Personal is Political: Economic and Sexual Justice in Modern India | 71 |
| Chughtai and the Indian Progressive Writers’ Movement..... | 73 |
| The Obscenity of Everyday Life: Liḥāf and the Marriage of Sex and Power | 83 |
| Before and After the Quilt | 91 |
| Off the Screen: Sexual Justice and the World of Bombay Cinema | 104 |
| Hand-in-Hand: Sexual and Social Progress in “Do Hāth” (A Pair of Hands)..... | 107 |
| Conclusion | 113 |
| 3. Reform, Education, and Woman as Subject | 115 |
| Women’s Reform..... | 119 |
| Desire and Exploration in <i>Terhī Lakīr</i> | 132 |
| Education against all odds in <i>Kāghazī Hai Pairahan</i> | 138 |
| Educated Subjectivity | 150 |
| Conclusion | 159 |
| 4. The Many Lives of Urdu: Language, Progressive Literature and Nostalgia | 161 |
| “Twins in different clothing:” A Brief History of the Hindi/Urdu Divide | 164 |
| Hindustani, Nationalism, National Language..... | 167 |
| Ismat Chughtai and the Place of Urdu in Post-Independence India | 172 |
| Nostalgia for Urdu in India | 186 |
| Conclusion | 201 |
| Conclusion: Can the Indo-Muslim Be Secular? | 203 |
| Appendix 1: Timeline | 216 |
| Bibliography | 219 |

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Note on Transliteration and Translation

In this dissertation, transliterations of original texts are provided so that speakers of both Urdu and Hindi will be able to appreciate the material, regardless of whether it is written in Perso-Arabic or Devanagari script.

I have adopted the Library of Congress system for the transliteration of Urdu with minor modifications. The letters of the Urdu script are transliterated as follows:

| | | | |
|---|-------------|----|--------|
| ا | a-/i-/u-/ā- | آ | ā- |
| ب | b | بھ | bh |
| پ | p | پھ | ph |
| ت | t | تھ | th |
| ٹ | ṭ | ٹھ | ṭh |
| ث | s | | |
| ج | j | جھ | jh |
| چ | ch | چھ | chh |
| ح | h | خ | kh |
| د | d | دھ | dh |
| ڈ | ḍ | ڈھ | ḍh |
| ذ | ẓ | ذھ | ẓh |
| ر | r | ڑ | ṛ |
| ڑ | ṛ | ڑھ | ṛh |
| ز | z | زھ | zh |
| س | s | ش | sh |
| ص | ṣ | ض | ẓ |
| ط | ṭ | ظ | ẓ |
| ع | gh | غ | gh |
| ف | f | ق | q |
| ک | k | کھ | kh |
| گ | g | گھ | gh |
| ل | l | م | m |
| ن | n | و | -n |
| و | v/o/ū/au | ہ | h/-a |
| ی | y/ī/-e/-ai- | ے | -e/-ai |
| ی | -ā | | |

Hindi transliteration also generally follows the Library of Congress system, but has been modified for easy comparison with Urdu. Thus, च ch, छ chh, ख kh, ग gh, क q, ष ś, ङ / ॠ -ṅ.

In the transliteration of modern names with a customary English spelling, I have tried to provide transliteration with diacritics at the first appearance of a name, followed by the customary spelling throughout the rest of the text. Thus, Ismat Chughtai for ‘Iṣmat Chughtā’ī, Shahid Latif for Shāhid Latīf, and so on.

All translations of Urdu and Hindi texts in this dissertation are my own unless otherwise

noted. In recent years, Tahira Naqvi and M. Asaduddin have made much of Ismat Chughtai's writing available to an English-reading audience. Because Chughtai often made use of humorous, colorful, and colloquial language, her work poses a unique set of challenges for translators who seek on the one hand to adhere to her usage but on the other to convey a taste of her humor. I have elected as a rule to cite texts from the original Urdu with my own translation in order to highlight particular aspects of a text that do not always come through in other's translations, but this is not to say that Naqvi and Asaduddin's translations are not adequate or enjoyable when taken on their own terms. The interested reader is referred to translations below:

The Quilt & Other Stories, trans. Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S. Hameed, (Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994).

The Crooked Line, trans. Tahira Naqvi, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995).

My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits, trans. Tahira Naqvi. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001).

Lifting the Veil: Selected Writings of Ismat Chughtai, trans. M. Asaduddin (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001).

A Very Strange Man, trans. Tahira Naqvi (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007).

Masooma: A Novel, trans. Tahira Naqvi (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2011).

A Life in Words: Memoirs, trans. M. Asaduddin (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2012).

A Chughtai Quartet: Obsession, The Wild One, Wild Pigeons, The Heart Breaks Free, trans. Tahira Naqvi (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2014).

Introduction

main musalmān hūn. but-parastī shirk hai. magar devmālā mere vaṭan kā varṣa hai. is meṇ ṣadiyon kā kalchar aur falsafa samoyā huā hai. īmān ‘alāḥida hai, vaṭan kī tahzīb ‘alāḥida hai. us meṇ merā barābar kā ḥiṣṣa hai jaise us kī miṭī dhūp aur pānī meṇ.

I am Muslim. Worshipping idols is akin to infidelity.¹ Yet the tales and legends of gods are my nation's inheritance. Encompassed within them are centuries of culture and philosophy. Faith is one thing; the culture of one's homeland is another. I am entitled to an equal share of it, just as I am entitled to an equal share of its earth, sunshine and water.²

With this passage from her short memoir for the magazine column *Ghubār-e Kāravān* (*Caravan Dust*), ‘Iṣmat Chughṭā’ī (henceforth Ismat Chughtai), delved into the complex, seemingly contradictory relationship between religious identity and national belonging. She laid claim to Muslim identity, making clear that she believed idols were at odds with one of the central tenets of Islam, namely the oneness of God. Yet, drawing a distinction between faith and culture, she claimed Hindu mythology as part of her national inheritance as an Indian. With a body of work that explored the tensions between religious and national belonging, Chughtai is celebrated by readers of Urdu for her short stories and novels and is recognized throughout India for her importance as a cultural critic. Her subaltern identities—as a woman and as a Muslim—play a role in the contemporary reception of her work. But the question of the conceptual and social conditions that allowed her to negotiate between her varying modes of identity (national,

1 In Islamic religious terminology, this refers to creating partners with God.

2 ‘Iṣmat Chughṭā’ī, “Ghubār-e Kāravān 9: ‘Iṣmat Chughṭā’ī,” *Ājkal* (New Delhi) 29, no. 4 (November 1970): 14; later published in *Kāghazī Hāi Pairahan*, ed. Vāriṣ ‘Alavī (New Delhi: India Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Publications Division, 1994), 34–35.

Introduction

gendered, and religious) has not been adequately explored. In this dissertation, I argue that it was her particular formation of the secular that allowed for this negotiation. At its core, Chughtai's critique of society hinged upon the equality (*barābarī*) of all Indian people, whether they be women or men, Muslim or Hindu, master or servant. The primacy of "humanity" (*insāniyat*) over other identities was the keystone of her formation of the secular, and has roots as in the longstanding critique of religious boundaries in a tradition that can be termed Islamicate humanism.³ It was also rooted in a cosmopolitan understanding of human worth engendered by a creative integration of ideas found in European realist literature. I contend that Chughtai's formation of the secular was primarily shaped by her participation in the Indian political and cultural Left's visions of modernity. Departing from most recent English-language scholarship on Chughtai, which considers her writing as a description of the realities of South Asian Muslim women's lives, I argue that Chughtai's work is a productive site of inquiry into formations of the secular among progressive Indo-Muslim intellectuals. This dissertation will explore the secular with relation to religious cosmopolitanism, with an emphasis on sexual autonomy and social progress, ideas concerning the role of education and an examination of Chughtai's many lives as an Indo-Muslim secular icon.

I build upon philosopher Akeel Bilgrami's understanding of the concept of secularism.

Bilgrami writes:

3 Ambiguities of religious identity abound in premodern South Asian literature. The poet Bullhe Shāh, for instance, declares in one of his lyrics, "Neither Arab am I nor man of Lahore / Nor Indian from the town of Nagaur / Neither Hindu am I nor Turk of Peshawar." Such multiple identities continue to play a role in the religious life of many South Asians, despite efforts of the colonial and modern states to fit subjects into neat categories. See David Gilmartin and Bruce Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2000); Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Introduction

Secularism requires that all religions should have the privilege of free exercise and be evenhandedly treated *except when a religion's practices are inconsistent with the ideals that a polity seeks to achieve* (ideals, often, though not always, enshrined in stated fundamental rights and other constitutional commitments) *in which case there is a lexicographical ordering in which the political ideals are placed first* [emphasis in the original].⁴

In response to this definition, it could be argued that Chughtai was simply in favor of toleration and pluralism, but by reviewing Bilgrami's account of why Gandhi was *not* a secular intellectual, we can understand better why Chughtai should be read as one. Specifically,

Secularism is a doctrine that is also introduced to further goals of a quite different sort that were not in the forefront of Gandhi's mind, and even when toleration and pluralism were at the core of what secularism sought to promote [...] Thus, for instance, it would never occur to Gandhi to be anxious to allow blasphemy to go uncensored. Nor did it particularly worry him that one or other religion, Hinduism or Islam, had personal laws that ran afoul of the ideals of gender equality in its family laws."⁵

Unlike Gandhi, Chughtai was concerned with the unequal distribution of rights to women under religious laws, and to her these political ideals are indeed placed first, before questions of religious norms and regulations. My project is not one of judging the merits of either Chughtai's work or the secularization of Muslim societies. Rather, my aim is to think about and expand what it means to be a Muslim in modern South Asia. In particular, I argue that Muslim literary figures provide an important and under-examined perspective on the secular in modern India. The Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM, Urdu: *taraqqī-pasand taḥrīk*), of which Chughtai was a particularly prominent member, continues to be evoked in contemporary nostalgia for a

4 Akeel Bilgrami, "Secularism: Its Content and Context," in *Secularism, Identity and Enchantment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 12.

5 Ibid., 29–30.

cosmopolitan and secular Indian past, and yet neither the movement nor Chughtai's work has been studied with relation to the crucial question of secularism in modern India.

Chughtai was one of a number of notable Urdu authors whose career began in association with the Progressive Writers' Movement founded in the 1930s.⁶ Progressive writers dominated the Urdu literary scene throughout the period leading up to Indian Independence and Partition. As one of its most prominent members, Chughtai serves as a productive case study of the creative ways Progressive Writers engaged with modernity during the mid-twentieth century in North India and Bombay. From her very first short story, "Kāfir" (Infidel), published in 1938, to her autobiography, published in 1979, Chughtai asserted a humanistic (*insānī*) and ultimately secular (*sekyūlar*) worldview by satirizing religious boundaries.⁷ From the very foundation of the PWM, the organization critiqued traditional Indian religious idealism as distracting from social causes. According to its 1936 manifesto, "Indian literature [...] has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in baseless spiritualism and ideality." In contrast, the Progressive Writers aimed to "deal with the basic problems of

6 Shabana Mahmud, "Angāre and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association," *Modern Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (1996): 447–67; Carlo Coppola, "The All-India Progressive Writers Association: The European Phase," in *Marxist Influence and South Asian Literature*, ed. Carlo Coppola, South Asia Series, Occasional Paper 23 (East Lansing: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1974), 1–34; Carlo Coppola, "The Angare Group: The Enfants Terribles of Urdu Literature," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 1 (1981): 57–69; Sajjad Zaheer, *The Light: A History of the Movement for Progressive Literature in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*, trans. Amina Azfar (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

7 That Chughtai participated in Marxist organizations does not make obvious her commitment to secularism. A number of contemporary intellectuals and social movements combined Marxist and socialist ideas with Islamist politics, often categorized under the rubric of "Islamic socialism." See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 221–260.

Introduction

hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection.”⁸ Through their literature, Progressive writers explored their ideas of humanism, which I argue is at its core a project to articulate what it means to be a citizen-subject in the modern Indian nation state.

I have chosen to focus this dissertation, the first book-length study of Chughtai, on questions of secularism specifically because doing so provides the opportunity to explore role of sexual autonomy and economic equality as they relate to Indian secular thought. This project also allows challenges the boundaries of the field of Indo-Muslim cultural studies though its focus on an avowedly secular thinker. While much of the scholarship on Indian secularism thus far focuses on political thinkers, studying the Progressive Writers’ Movement, of which Chughtai was one of the most significant representatives, provides an opportunity to better understand the role of literature in articulating and disseminating secular ideas in modern South Asia. Drawing upon Islamicate humanism combined with Marxist and socialist thought, integration of sexual and economic justice set Chughtai apart from even her Progressive comrades. Her significance is readily attested to by the ways in which her work has been taken up by Indians in the contemporary period to invoke the secular possibilities in Urdu literature.

I argue that Chughtai must be read as a writer of modern life. In Baudelaire’s essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” in which he coined the term “modernity,” the artist is an individual subject lost in a swarm of social life, aware of a historical rupture with the past and open to the possibilities of the present.⁹ Modernity as a conceptual term is different from a simple temporal marker—it is a set of norms and practices that have emerged in the post-Enlightenment world. I specifically avoid confining modernity to Europe, because the same issues of the rejection of

8 Coppola, “The All-India Progressive Writers Association: The European Phase,” 6–9.

9 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*. (London: Phaidon, 1964).

Introduction

tradition and the pursuit of individualism and equality have developed throughout the world including in South Asia. As a Marxist intellectual, Chughtai's perspective was shaped by the radical transformation of the geopolitical world, increasing urbanization, and the development of the nation-state. Additionally, her work celebrated the possibilities of modernity. In particular, she focused on the possibility for women to have self-determination, which was for her one of the core tenets of what it means to be human. One clear example of the dichotomy between new and old can be found in her essay "Ek Bāt" (A Word) where she writes, "The new son of this new world is stubborn, bad-tempered and unyielding. He doesn't like the existing order. He is restless for a new one."¹⁰ On the eve of Independence, Progressive writers like Chughtai tried to shape the future of an independent India through their own particular visions of Indian modernity.

Biography

Ismat Chughtai was born in 1911 in the North Indian town of Badāyūn, where her father, Mīrzā Qāsim 'Alī Beg, worked as a civil servant. She was the younger sister of noted Urdu writer 'Azīm Beg Chughtā'ī. She was among the first generation of Indian Muslim girls to attend modern schools. These schools were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the efforts of community reformers. Many of these "daughters of reform" would later go on to shape ideas of a modern Indian womanhood, as Chughtai has been credited with doing. In school, Chughtai studied subjects including English, Russian and Urdu literature.

10 *na 'ī duniyā kā nayā beṭā ziddī bad-mizāj aur akhar hai. vuh maujūda nizām ko pasand nahīn kartā. vuh ek na'e nizām ke li'e be-kal hai.* 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī, "Ek Bāt," in *Ek Bāt* (Maktaba Urdū: Lahore, 1946), 13.

She passed her matriculation examinations in 1932 from Aligarh Girls' School and went on to attend Isabella Thoburn College.¹¹ IT College, as she and others fondly referred to it, was a prominent women's college attended by fellow literary luminaries including Attia Hosain (1913–1998) and Qurratul-‘ain Ḥaidar (henceforth Qurratulain Hyder, 1927–2007).

During Chughtai's final year at Aligarh Girls' School, authors Sajjād Zāhīr (henceforth Sajjad Zaheer, 1905–1973), Aḥmad ‘Alī (henceforth Ahmed Ali, 1910–1994), Rashīd Jahān (1905–1952) and Maḥmūduzzafar (1908–1954) published the short fiction collection *Angāre* (Embers, 1932). The publication of *Angāre* and its subsequent banning by the colonial administration is often seen as a catalyst for the formation of the Indian Progressive Writers' Movement. *Angāre*, and in particular the work and influence of Rashīd Jahān, had a great impact on Chughtai's development. She wrote one of her earliest articles in the Aligarh University newspaper in support of Jahān. Chughtai maintained a lifelong affiliation with the PWM, and she attended the first Progressive Writers' Conference in 1936, along with several others who were still students at the time, but who would become major literary figures in the coming decade: ‘Alī Sardār Ja‘frī (henceforth Ali Sardar Jafri, 1913–2000), Jān Niṣār Akhtar (henceforth Jan Nisar Akhtar, 1914–1976), Khwāja Aḥmad ‘Abbās (henceforth Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, 1914–1987), and Shāhid Laṭīf (henceforth Shahid Latif, 1913–1967), Chughtai's future husband.¹²

Chughtai was a prolific writer, publishing over one hundred short stories, novels, and stories for films and radio plays. In 1938, at the age of twenty-seven, she submitted her first short

11 For more on early women's education among Indian Muslims, and specifically the foundation of Aligarh Girl's School, see Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

12 On the history of the All-India PWA meetings, see Carlo Coppola, "Urdu Poetry, 1935-1970: The Progressive Episode" (Ph.D., The University of Chicago, 1975).

Introduction

story, “Kāfir” (Infidel), to the journal *Sāqī*, where it was published. “Kāfir” told the story of the fraught relationship of a Muslim girl and her Hindu boyfriend. The two ultimately flaunt societal norms by eloping. Her fiction was sensational, and proved to be popular almost immediately. With an established network through her brother ‘Aẓīm, Chughtai became a regular contributor to *Sāqī*. In 1940, she was translated into English for the first time, when her story “Genḍā” (Marigold), translated by Ahmed Ali, appeared in the London literary magazine *Folios of New Writing*, under the title “The Little Mother.” Published alongside new writing by contemporary authors such as Virginia Woolf and George Orwell, this translation made Chughtai’s name known on the international stage. Maulānā Salāḥuddīn Aḥmad published the first critical essay on her writing in 1941 in the Urdu literary magazine *Adabī Dunyā*. In the same year, Chughtai moved to Bombay to work as an inspector of schools and in 1942 married Shahid Latif, then a writer for Bombay Talkies, with whom she set up the film production company *Filmina*.

Chughtai is well known for the obscenity charges brought against her in 1942 for “Liḥāf” (The Quilt), a short story which explored a number of complex, sometimes troubling relationships set in the household of an aristocratic Muslim family. The most famous and controversial of these is the relationship between the mistress of the household and her female servant. Though acquitted of all charges in the 1946 trial, she retained a reputation as an obscene writer. Yet this reputation did not take away from the appreciation that Chughtai’s artistic and intellectual contributions, beyond “Liḥāf,” garnered within India and internationally. Among her many awards and accolades, she received the Padma Śrī, a civilian award presented by the Government of India for her contribution to Indian literature and education, as well as the President’s Award for Best Film Story for *Garam Havā* (Scorching Winds, 1973), which depicts the perils experienced by an Indian Muslim family in the immediate aftermath of Partition.

Throughout her life, Chughtai lived as a cosmopolitan public intellectual with global connections, attending the Helsinki meeting of the International Council of Women in 1954¹³ and traveling to China and the USSR several times, including a final trip to Moscow in 1983 to receive the 1982 *Soviet Land* Nehru Award.¹⁴ Her relationship with Soviet and Russian writing and culture was a lifelong one. She considered herself a Communist and compared the cooperation of diverse populations in the Soviet Union and India. She died in 1991 in Bombay and was cremated, a practice that in India is strongly marked as Hindu. There were many who objected to this choice for a member of the Muslim community, while others saw it as consistent with Chughtai's iconoclastic persona.

Ismat Chughtai in Urdu Studies and Beyond

Despite the continuing interest in Chughtai's life and work by translators and popular writers,¹⁵ the majority of scholars who have engaged with her work have been firmly in the field of Urdu-language literary studies.¹⁶ Chughtai is often praised as one of 20th-century India's

13 Chughtai belonged to the Indian affiliate of ICW, the International Council of Women of India, which was founded in Bombay in 1919. On the history of the ICW, see Éliane Gubin and Leen van Molle, *Women Changing the World: A History of the International Council of Women*, trans. Tony Langham and Plym Peeters (Brussels: Éditions Racine, 2005).

14 *Soviet Land* was the magazine of the Soviet Embassy to India published simultaneously in English and Hindi. The Nehru Award was established by the magazine to honor Indian intellectual and cultural figures.

15 Recent interest in Chughtai has been fueled by a proliferation of translations of her work into English, most prominently by Tahira Naqvi and M. Asaddudin. See the note on Translation at the beginning of this volume. Asaduddin has also written a short biography of Chughtai intended for an Indian Anglophone audience.

16 Though this is the first dissertation or scholarly monograph in English focused on Ismat Chughtai, a number of scholars have written dissertations and books about other Urdu writers who were contemporaries of Chughtai. Some examples include Ayesha Jalal, *The*

canonical Urdu authors. In recent Urdu monographs, she is lauded for her colloquial writing style and her use of the language of women, or *begamātī zabān*. The idea that women have a particular idiomatic use of language is not unique to Urdu, but notions of *begamātī zabān* (ladies' language) goes back at least to the *rekhtī* poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁷ Additionally, she is praised for her realist aesthetic sensibilities.¹⁸ For example, Aḥmad Ashraf writes, "In the evolution of Urdu fiction, her name is at the head of the list."¹⁹ Ashraf argues that this position is deserved because Chughtai's writings often go where others fear to tread. Speaking of what he identifies as her fearlessness, he writes, "Ismat"²⁰ is an intrepid

Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times, and Work across the India-Pakistan Divide, Lawrence Stone Lectures (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); A. Sean Pue, *I Too Have Some Dreams: N.M. Rashed and Modernism in Urdu Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Daisy Rockwell, *Upendranath Ashk: A Critical Biography* (New Delhi: Katha, 2004); Mehr Afshan Farooqi, *Urdu Literary Culture: Vernacular Modernity in the Writing of Muhammad Hasan Askari* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

- 17 See Gail Minault, "Begamati Zaban: Women's Language and Culture in the Nineteenth Century," in *Gender, Language, and Learning: Essays in Indo-Muslim Cultural History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), 116–34; Carla Petievich, "Doganias and Zanakhis: The Invention and Subsequent Erasure of Urdu Poetry's 'Lesbian' Voice," in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2002), 47–60.
- 18 See Farzānah Aslam, *'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī bahāisiyat nāvil nigār* (New Delhi: Sīmānt Prakāshan, 1996); Muḥammad Ashraf, *Urdū fikshan ke irtiqā meṅ 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī kā ḥiṣṣa* (Lucknow: Nuṣrat Publishers, 1997); 'Ishrat Ārā Sulṭāna, *'Iṣmat kā samājī shu'ūr, nāvilōṅ kī raushnī meṅ* (Patna: Milne ke pate Book Emporium, 1986); Tal'at Māh, *'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī Kī Fikshan Nigārī* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 2009); Shabnam Rizvī, *'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī kī nāvil nigārī: Ṭerhī lakīr kī raushnī meṅ* (Lucknow: Nusrat Publishers, 1992); Jagdīsh Chandar Vadhāvan, *'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī, shakḥṣiyat aur fann* (Delhi: Jagdīsh Chandar Vadhāvan, 1996).
- 19 "Urdū fiction kī irtiqā' main un kā nām sāre fihrist hai." Ashraf, *Urdū fikshan ke irtiqā' meṅ 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī kā ḥiṣṣa*, 9.
- 20 Ashraf is typical of Urdu scholars in referring to Chughtai as "Ismat." Referring to women writers by their first names potentially reflects a domestication of them and their work. Such familiarity is also related to the familial terms applied to them, for example

and fearless short story writer. She never shrinks from the terrifying bitterness of reality.”²¹

Ashraf also argues that Chughtai stands out from other women authors through her unique idiom. Evaluating her use of language, he writes, “Ismat also used language in her own way [...]. She has made use of easy and commonly understood words. Within [her writing] she tested the limits of women’s speech, idiom and sayings and has given them a unique form.”²² These elements of her writing style are noteworthy because of the dominance of male writers with an assumed formality in their writing. Though the Progressive Writers advocated for simplified writing styles, the mention of women’s speech (*begamāṭī zabān*) stands in for saying that her style was feminine. Yet, Chughtai’s is also hailed as unique among women authors for her depictions of sexuality. Ashraf writes, “She is the first woman in Urdu letters to present sexual topics with extraordinary fearlessness.”²³ As we will see in this dissertation, Chughtai’s literary persona as a fearless champion of sexual justice is a recurring trope in the small corpus of secondary literature about her writing, and indeed, this image has become part of her celebrity as an author.

A further trope reflected in the Urdu-language criticism on Chughtai is that her writing unveils women’s lives for her readers and depicts their realities. When discussing Chughtai’s

“‘Ismat Āpā” (Elder Sister Ismat). For comparison, Sa‘ādat Ḥasan Maṭo (henceforth Saadat Hasan Manto, 1912–1955) is the male author to whom Chughtai’s work is most often likened. Manto is always referred to by his surname in secondary literature.

21 *‘Ismat ek na daravar, be-bāk aḥsāna nigār hai. vuh sach kī talkhī aur ḥaqīqiyat kī ḥawlnaqī se kabhī khaufzāda nahīn hotīn*” Ashraf, *Urdū fikshan ke irtiḳā’ meṇ ‘Ismat Chughtā’ ī kā ḥiṣṣa*, 9.

22 “*Zabān bhī ‘Ismat ne makhsūs andāz kī āpnāya hai [...] unhon ne āsān aur ām fahm se kām liyā hai, aur us meṇ begamāṭī zabān, muḥāvaron aur kahavaton kī āzmā’ish kar ke use ek anokhā rūp de diyā hai.*” Ibid., 10.

23 “*Urdū adab meṇ vuh pehlī hī khātūn haiṇ jinhon ne ghair ma’mulī be-bākī ke sāth jinsī mauzū’āt ko bhī apne aḥsānon aur nāvilon meṇ pesh kiyā.*” Ibid., 9.

ideas about society, ‘Ishrat Ārā Sulṭānah writes, “Our society’s hypocrisy is unveiled in *Ziddi*,”²⁴ The metaphor of unveiling, of course, implies the existence of an underlying reality of Indian lives. It is also a gendered metaphor and thus references Chughtai’s place as a woman writer. Sultana writes of the novel *Ma ‘shūma*: “this is such a depiction that is in fact a mirror in which society can see its own image.”²⁵ Indeed, such a reading was very much promoted by the realist literary project. Yet, recognizing that literary realism is itself a tool, this dissertation seeks rather to understand Chughtai’s writing not as a reflection of truths about Indian Muslim cultural values, but rather as part of an intellectual project to promote certain social formations and norms at the expense of others.

Likewise, in European and American secondary literature, there is the assumption that Chughtai’s writing primarily represents Muslim women’s lives and experiences. Dagmar Marková, in her article “The Private Lives of the Indian Muslim Middle Class as Depicted by Ismat Cuḡṭāī,” utilizes Chughtai’s work as a window into what she believes to be the intriguing and generally hidden world of Muslim women. Marková’s analysis proceeds from a chronological summary of Chughtai’s stories. She begins with a reading of Chughtai’s first published play, *Fasādī*. As a basis for much of her analysis, Marková cites Chughtai’s claims that her stories stem from the experiences of her own friends and family. In her discussion of “Liḥāf,” for instance, she focuses on Chughtai’s account of meeting the woman upon whom the story is purportedly based. At times, Marková gestures towards the possibility that Chughtai’s stories are not all based on depictions of individuals she knew personally, but does not explore

24 “*Hamārī mu ‘āshare kī hypocracy “ziddī” meṇ be niqāb ho gayī hai.*” ‘Ishrat Ārā Sulṭāna, *‘Iṣmat kā samājī shu ‘ūr, nāvilon kī raushnī meṇ*, 10.

25 “*yih ek aisī taṣvīr hai jo vāqī ‘atan ā ‘īna hai jis meṇ samāj apne naqsh-o-nigār dekh saktā hai,*” Ibid., 11.

this possibility in great depth. Marková writes, “In some of these first-person stories, it is difficult to judge whether they are really autobiographical, or if the author narrated them generally from the position of a Muslim women, stuck in a web of intricate kinship relationships.”²⁶ Yet she does not interrogate the ideology of Chughtai’s stories; rather, she takes the truth claims of Chughtai’s writing at face value.

In the existing English-language scholarship there is a disproportionate emphasis on what is deemed the lesbian episode of Chughtai’s story “Liḥāf,” which is drafted into the service of a particular queer studies agenda. For example, both of Geeta Patel’s articles on Chughtai focus on “Liḥāf.”²⁷ In “Marking the Quilt,” Patel writes that, “as a particular articulation of female-female sexuality and desire, where a biography of a lesbian (proto or otherwise) cannot be used as a reading frame, the story offers an alternative narrative of same sex desire.”²⁸ In a second article, “Homely Housewives Run Amok,” Patel similarly argues that in the story, “erotic alignments between women are transgressions conducted within what appears to be a seamless (traditional Muslim) heterosexual marriage.”²⁹ At its core, Patel’s argument states that the refusal of the story’s protagonists to remain “chaste and desexualized” even after marriage “denaturalize[s] the apparently necessary movement that turns marriage into heterosexuality.” Chughtai’s uncanny representation of the home thus “queried and queered the domestic arena.” Patel writes that

26 Dagmar Marková, “The Private Lives of the Indian Muslim Middle Class as Depicted by Ismat Cuḡtāi,” *Archiv Orientalní* 74 (2006): 100.

27 See Geeta Patel, “Marking the Quilt: Veil, Harem/Home, and the Subversion of Colonial Civility,” *Colby Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2001): 174–88; Geeta Patel, “Homely Housewives Run Amok: Lesbians in Marital Fixes,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 1 (2004): 131–57.

28 Geeta Patel, “Marking the Quilt: Veil, Harem/Home, and the Subversion of Colonial Civility,” *Colby Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2001): 179.

29 Geeta Patel, “Homely Housewives Run Amok: Lesbians in Marital Fixes,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 1 (2004): 139.

woman is an object in motion and “whether authors describe this movement in Newtonian and Euclidean or in fractal and chaos metaphors, the woman steadfastly tethers movements that occur simultaneously around and through her.” Patel’s project is to use Chughtai’s work, particularly the relationship between Begum Jan and Rubbū in “Liḥāf,” to question the ideologies of domesticity and what she terms “homeliness.”

By contrast, Priyamvada Gopal’s perspective, presents Chughtai as a purveyor of modernity. In her essay “Habitations of Womanhood,” Gopal writes, “As Rashid Jahan had done in *Angarey*, Chughtai was claiming for herself the right to write about the female body, but she was also going further by recognising its claims to pleasure and fulfilment.”³⁰ Like other scholars, Gopal considers one of Chughtai’s main contributions to be her exploration of the sexuality of women. Yet she takes the focus beyond sexuality when she writes that both writers “engaged reflexively with modernity as an ongoing project in their own lives and in the lives of community and nation.”³¹ For Gopal, modernity in South Asia cannot be reduced simply to a derivative discourse with regard to the West. Rather, she argues that it resulted from a “fractured process” drawing upon pre-colonial resources structures of power and privilege as well as new ideas about society. Gopal points out that scholars have paid scant attention to “the ways in which women themselves not only negotiated a ‘fractured modernity’³² but also *participated* in its construction, in both the public and the domestic spheres.”³³ In Gopal’s reading of Chughtai,

30 Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence* (London: Routledge, 2005), 67.

31 Ibid.

32 Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

33 Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India*, 67.

modernity is an inherently contradictory enterprise, the social ills of which must be fought, but which still remains preferable to the pre-modern.³⁴ While Gopal only discusses in passing what she terms Chughtai's "postcolonial humanist" project,³⁵ I seek to explore the ramifications of these ideas by examining more thoroughly Chughtai's thought about the secular in the project of modern literature. In terms of this current scholarship, my work will take a decidedly different focus by examining the ways in which Chughtai's life, work, and legacy have engaged with the formation of an Indo-Muslim secular.

Chughtai as Secular Critic

One of the thorniest legacies of colonialism is the problem of the secular. Since Independence in 1947, the secular ideologies of the Indian state have been the subject of numerous controversies. On the one hand, the Indian doctrine of secularism purports to treat all citizens equally regardless of their religious affiliation, while at the same time, the government continues to maintain separate legal codes for members of different religious communities. There is a voluminous scholarly literature on secularism as it relates to postcolonial societies, and in particular to its incompatibility with Muslims and Islam. The work of Talal Asad frames academic debates and represents scholarly hegemony in studies of Islam and secularity.³⁶ According to Asad, "over time a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities have come

34 Ibid., 87.

35 Ibid., 85.

36 On the reception of Asad's oeuvre, see David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2006).

Introduction

together to form ‘the secular.’”³⁷ Concerning the importance of studying the secular, Asad writes, “It is common knowledge that religion and the secular are closely linked, both in our thought and in the way they have emerged historically. Any discipline that seeks to understand ‘religion’ must also try to understand its other.”³⁸ While Asad notes that “the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity,” his research is drawn “almost entirely from West European history because that history has had profound consequences for the ways that the doctrine of secularism has been conceived and implemented in the rest of the modernizing world.”³⁹ Asad states at the outset that “the difficulty with secularism as a doctrine of war and peace in the world is not that it is European (and therefore alien to the non-West) but that it is closely connected with the rise of a system of capitalist nation-state.”⁴⁰ And yet, while Asad seems to acknowledge a multiplicity of origins for the category of the secular, it is clear that he believes that engagement by Muslims with the secular episteme stands apart from a reified Islamic discursive tradition. Asad’s perspective on Islam and by extension Muslim societies is perhaps best summed up in his early claim that “If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam, one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the Hadith. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs, and morals. It is a tradition.”⁴¹ While Asad claims that the secular state cannot truly recognize Muslims as

37 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 16.

38 Ibid., 22.

39 Ibid., 25.

40 Ibid., 7.

41 Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C: Center for

Introduction

Muslims, because “the citizens who constitute a democratic state belong to a class that is defined only by what is common to all its members and its members only,”⁴² throughout his writing, he claims that a virtuous Muslim is “seen not as an autonomous individual” but “as an individual inhabiting the moral space shared by all who are bound by God (the *umma* [global Muslim community]).”⁴³ In simplified language, Asad claims that Muslims are by necessity bound to other Muslims. He argues for a rejection of the political model of the liberal nation-state and opts instead for a paradigm of “decentered pluralism”⁴⁴ in which religious communities can participate on their own terms.

While Asad is right to call attention to the problematic nature of social space in multicultural societies, he ignores the diversity of voices within the Islamic tradition itself by privileging a single legalistic interpretation of the religion. Intellectuals like Chughtai, who find little voice in Asad’s Islam, yet who struggled with and refined ideas of the secular outside the European context, played a fundamental role in articulating modernity in South Asia, and there is no reason to think their ideas are somehow less authentic than those of their Euro-American counterparts. Moreover the construction of Euro-America as impermeably distinct from the Muslim world or South Asia reifies civilizational categories and does not sufficiently allow for a global history of ideas. This is not to say that European intellectual history is not relevant to South Asia. Yet mimicry and integration are not the same mechanism. Asad’s approach to

Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14. (cited in Aamir R. Mufti, “Why I Am Not a Postsecularist,” *Boundary 2* 40, no. 1 (2013): 14.)

42 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 173.

43 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 219.

44 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 177.

intellectual history separates geographies between which there is and always has been constant exchange. There is certainly an imbalance of power between the colonizer and the colonized, but I attempt to take seriously the intellectual products to which that encounter gave rise. I argue that literary figures like Chughtai drew creatively from both Indo-Muslim and global intellectual traditions to offer her readers a particular vision of modernity in which identities as Muslim, Indian, and woman are not incompatible. It is only by acknowledging global aspects of the history of ideas that we can account for such figures.

Through my investigation of Chughtai, I will illustrate the ways in which Muslim intellectuals engaged with the questions raised by the experience of modernity.⁴⁵ This period saw a number of Indian Muslim intellectuals coming to terms with the dual inheritance of Islamic thought and colonial and postcolonial systems of education. The reckoning of these two was a thoroughly modern dilemma. The possible implications of the experience of modernity, for thinkers like Michel Foucault, are characterized by a break with tradition and an attitude of critique, which originated in the Enlightenment.⁴⁶ Foucault remarked that the motto of the

45 Here it is important to draw a distinction between modernity and Modernism (*jadīdiyat*), the latter being a literary and artistic movement which developed in some ways parallel to and in others opposing the Progressive (*tarāqqī-pasand*) movement. See Pue, *I Too Have Some Dreams*; Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, Islamic Civilization & Muslim Networks (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

46 One of the most prevalent questions asked in popular and even scholarly circles with relation to Islam and Muslim societies is: “Why hasn’t there been a Muslim Enlightenment?” The question itself is based on many unsubstantiated assumptions. The first assumption is that there has not been a Muslim Enlightenment. The reasoning is that though Islamic and European intellectual histories are both based upon the Aristotelian tradition, only in Europe were the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries marked by an emphasis on reason and individualism and by a rebellion against the authority of religious institutions. It is then claimed that only after the colonial encounter were such foreign ideas imposed on colonized peoples. Yet there is emerging research that indicates certain similarities between the trajectories of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Islamicate thought with what was taking place in early Enlightenment Europe (see for example Rajeev Kinra, “Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility The Global Historical Legacy

Enlightenment, following the aphorism of Immanuel Kant, would be “dare to know.”⁴⁷ Indian Muslims writers discussed the connection between knowledge and power. Like other contemporary Muslim intellectuals, Chughtai engaged in the practice of critique even beyond her writing. Chughtai’s claim to fame as societal critic is attributed to her “fearlessness” and “iconoclasm.” This reputation was firmly established within her own lifetime through her rejection of the authority of legalistic religion and the authority of patriarchy, which she discarded as traditions incompatible with reasoned critique and with modern life.

Structure of Project

Chughtai career spanned the 1930s through the 1980s, a period that marked the emergence of South Asia’s postcolonial modernity. While this dissertation does not follow a strictly chronological organization, it does try to address this period as a whole. In addition to her short stories, novels, and films, I draw attention to previously unexamined materials from the personal archives of her family and the National Film Archives of India. The chapters of this dissertation explore the secular with relation to religious cosmopolitanism, emphasis on sexual

of Mughal *Ṣulḥ-i Kull*,” *The Medieval History Journal* 16, no. 2 (2013): 251–95.) More importantly, however, the rhetorical strategy of pointing to a missing “Islamic Enlightenment” fallaciously assumes that intellectual development must take place in all societies in the same way and at the same time.

- 47 Michael Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 35. As a scholar located within an interdisciplinary field, I must contend with the broad implications of interdisciplinary critique in the scholarly enterprise. In her article “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity,” Judith Butler writes: “When one is undertaking a critique, one is not simply supplying the legitimating ground of any project of knowledge, but one is asking a set of questions about how that mode of self-legitimation takes place. Those questions are: “in what way?” and “by what right?” “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 777–778.) This dissertation attempts to expand the boundaries of scholarship on Muslim societies by exploring the ideas of Muslim intellectuals who espoused secular politics.

Introduction

autonomy and social justice, and ideas concerning the role of education.

The first chapter, “Sacred Duty: Ismat Chughtai’s Cosmopolitan Justice between Islam and the Secular,” discusses Chughtai’s thought in relation to earlier Indo-Muslim traditions of humanism and contrasts her with Islamic modernist thinkers, notably Muḥammad Iqbāl. In this chapter I explore Chughtai’s use of Islamicate topoi in her autobiographical writings and novel *Dil kī Duniyā* (The World of the Heart, 1962). I then introduce current debates surrounding the question of secularism in South Asia as an entrée to Chughtai’s writing on communalism.

Through Chughtai’s film *Garam Havā* (Scorching Winds, 1973) and short story “Muqaddas Farz” (Sacred Duty, 1983), I examine Chughtai’s thought on Muslim belonging and the need to struggle for social justice in India. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Chughtai’s perspective regarding Muslim personal law in the wake of the 1985 Shah Bano case. I argue that, by rejecting the inferior status of women within Muslim legal codes, Chughtai pursued what she saw as moral equality to a more radical degree than the postcolonial Indian state, which enshrined separate codes of personal law based on religious community. Ultimately, the secular ideals of equality, autonomy and human dignity were the mainstays of her thought, without regard to whether these were pursued through “Islamic” means.

In the next chapter, “The Personal is Political: Economic and Sexual Progress in Modern India,” I argue that Chughtai, unlike other members of the Progressive Writers’ Movement, emphasized the link between hierarchical economic injustice and limitations on autonomous sexual choice. The chapter begins with an overview of the attitudes of the Progressive Writers toward the role of sexuality in literature. I then engage in a close reading of the short story “Liḥāf” (The Quilt, 1942), a story famous for its depiction of a sexual relationship between two women. I argue that by through evocations of uncanniness, the story draws attention to the

Introduction

relationship between economic dependency and sexual autonomy without naming the relationship outright. The chapter then goes on to explore the criticism that Chughtai received following the publication of the story, branding her as an obscene writer and culminating in the 1946 obscenity trial in Lahore. I argue that by reading “Liḥāf” in conversation with Chughtai’s later writings which link sexual autonomy with economic disparity, Chughtai’s discussion of sexuality was not an end in and of itself but was rather used in the service of a progressive social agenda.

The third chapter, “Reform, Education, and Woman as Subject,” begins with an overview of a period of self-reflection among Indian Muslims, which ensued after the demise of the Mughal Empire in 1857. Social reformers of the post-1857 generation including Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī as well as Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī and Nazīr Aḥmad, saw the education of women as a necessity primarily within a context where legitimacy within the Muslim community was based on a projection of respectability (*sharāfat*). While these reformers’ views on education had great impact on Chughtai’s generation, I argue that in her writing, particularly the novel *Ṭerhī Lakīr*, Chughtai deployed narratives of education as foundational to the formation of an emancipated girl, one who liberates herself by rejecting the “old rules” (*purānī qānūn*). I contend that as Chughtai’s literary celebrity grew, she fashioned an authorial persona for herself in which she came to embody the very characteristics of her protagonists. The chapter concludes with a reading of Chughtai’s autobiographical essays in which she deploys a persona of her younger self to present the schoolgirl as one who experiments with and ultimately rejects gendered boundaries of propriety and respectability and who grows up to become a full and equal member of the Indian nation.

Introduction

The fourth chapter, “The Many Lives of Urdu: Language, Progressive Literature and Nostalgia,” explores the fate of the Urdu language in independent India. Over the course of the twentieth century, there was a shift of focus for Progressive writers from that of establishing Hindustani, the common register shared between Hindi and Urdu, as the national language of independent India, to an effort to continue Urdu language and literature in non-written, transliterated and translated forms. As one of the most outspoken representatives of the Progressive Writers’ Movement, Chughtai’s views on language and script stood in opposition to a nationalist position that equated language and community. In this chapter, I argue that her insights regarding the continued significance of Urdu in India in spite of its partial displacement foresaw contemporary nostalgia for a cosmopolitan, pre-colonial past and the space of secular possibility that Urdu continues to evoke.

As a field, cultural studies aims to present cultures as constantly interacting and changing sets of practices and processes. This dissertation aims to question the assumptions regarding what types of textual and human subjects are considered representatives of “Indo-Muslim Culture” in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Unlike previous works, which describe Chughtai’s life through a heroic narrative that presumes a direct relation between texts, reality, and their subsequent effect, I interrogate the unexamined secular assumptions on which her texts rely. Further, by engaging with readings of Chughtai’s texts and contexts, this dissertation presents the first study of its kind, examining Indian secular thought through the lens of an Urdu literary figure. As such, this dissertation offers new perspectives on intersections between popular culture and political and religious thought in modern India through the lens of a celebrated literary figure whose legacy continues to be invoked.

Chapter One

Sacred Duty: Ismat Chughtai's Cosmopolitan Justice between Islam and the Secular

In her 1952 essay “From Bombay to Bhopal,” Chughtai recounts an episode that occurred as she was riding a train with a group of fellow writers en route to a conference. While they played rummy to pass the time, the train pulled past the shrine of the thirteenth-century saint Ḥājī Malang.¹ With characteristic humor, Chughtai reconstructs her group's conversation about the fate of the shrine as a symbol for Indo-Muslim practice in the new climate of post-Partition India. Krishan Chandar (1914–1977), the acting secretary of the Progressive Writers' Movement, asks whimsically, “Don't these venerable saints have conferences? If there were a conference and Kaliyar Sharīf, Ajmer Sharīf, Ghāzī Miyān, and Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī² deigned to grace it with their presence, what would they talk about? What problems would they have?”³ Chughtai jokes that they would probably complain that people do not give enough in offerings and that

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- 1 Ḥājī Malang Sharīf is a particularly powerful symbol. Though it is a shrine to a Muslim saint, the hereditary right to conduct its festival belongs to a Brahmin family and the tomb is managed by an organization called “The Secular Trust.” Indeed, in more recent times, this blurring of religious boundaries has made the shrine a target for the Hindu Right. See Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 107–109.
 - 2 The shrines of Ṣābir Kaliyarī (1196-1291 CE) at Kaliyar and Mu'īn al-dīn Chishtī (1141–1236 CE) at Ajmer (the text treats the latter as if it were two separate shrines) are important shrines in the religious topography of Northern India belonging to the Chishtī Sufī order. The shrine of Ghāzī Miyān (d. 1032 CE) in Bahraich is discussed later in this chapter. On Islamic shrine culture in contemporary India, see the important fieldwork of Carla Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral: Everyday Healing in an Ambiguously Islamic Place*, South Asia across the Disciplines (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
 - 3 *un pīr-faqīr logon kī kyā kānfirins nahīn hoten? agar un kī ek kānfirins ho us men kaliyar sharīf, ajmer sharīf, ghāzī miyān, mu'īn al-dīn chishtī tashrīf lā'en to bhalā kis qism kī bāt chīt karenḡī? un kī kyā mushkilāt honḡī?* ‘Ismat Chughtā'ī, “Bamba'ī se Bhopāl tak,” in *Chū'ī Mū'ī* (Bombay: Kutub Pabliharz, 1952), 57–58.

attendance has been low since many of India's wealthy Muslims moved to Pakistan. Chandar replies: "Hmpf. So why don't they go to Pakistan, too? They do fulfill the whole world's oaths and wishes..."⁴ Yet in Chughtai's recounting of the conversation, she forcefully asserts that there will be a continued place for Islam in India: "How can you say this? India is a secular state. Religious tolerance will persist here. Muslims will have the right to freely construct as many shrines to Ḥājī Malang as they want to build."⁵ The use of the shrine as a symbol of the secular freedom and religious choice is remarkable. In Chughtai's text, the diverse followers of shrines like Ḥājī Malang Sharīf stand in stark opposition to the rigid boundaries of the religious communalism that characterized the Partition of India. Tensions between the religious and the secular, between the heritage of Islamicate tolerance and the fundamentalism of Islamic modernism, play a significant role in Chughtai's work. Ultimately such questions were tied to the question of a person's ability to live their own lives free from undue social constrictions.

Despite the fact that those outside Urdu studies remember Chughtai as a Muslim author,⁶ she herself repeatedly emphasized her own adherence to humanism and humanist values (*insān-dostī*, *mazhab-e insāniyat*). This humanism was based both in inherited traditions of Islamicate humanism and in contemporary forms of Marxist thought that circulated among the Progressive Writers in Chughtai's formative period during the 1930s and 1940s. Her stories were

4 *unh to phir yih log bhī pākistān kyūn nahīn chale jāte? dunyā kī mannaten murāden pūrī karte haiṅ. zarā apnā mazār sharīf khiskā le jā'ēn.* Ibid., 58.

5 *yih āp kaisī kah rahe haiṅ. hindustān ek sekūlar eṣṭet hai. yihān mazhabī ravādārī qā'im rahegī. musilmānon ko ḥaq 'āṣil hogā ki vuh jitne ḥājī malang banānā chāheṅ āzādī se banā sakte haiṅ!* Ibid.

6 See for instance Chughtai's inclusion in Gouri Srivastava, *The Legend Makers: Some Eminent Muslim Women of India* (New Delhi: Concept Pub. Co, 2003), a celebratory biographical anthology of well-known Muslim women in India. Chughtai is analyzed as a reporter of Muslim lives in Marková, "The Private Lives of the Indian Muslim Middle Class as Depicted by Ismat Cuḡtāi."

characterized by the cosmopolitan use of religion and religious symbolism to emphasize a shared national belonging not limited by communal affiliation.⁷ While Chughtai's thought revealed an ongoing tension between national belonging and universal humanist morality, she held that all Indians, regardless of religious affiliation, gender, or socioeconomic status, should be held to the same moral standard. In addition to exploring religious themes in Chughtai's work, this chapter provides a corrective to the historiography of Muslims in South Asia that revolves primarily around a narrative of communalism. As historian Ayesha Jalal writes, "in effacing the individual and privileging the telos of partition, South Asian historiography has succumbed to a communitarian mode of analysis."⁸ Studying Chughtai as a secular intellectual,⁹ rather than as part of the collective of Muslim intellectuals concerned with the primacy of religion allows us to deprivilege the role of normative Islam in the thought of Muslim-identified intellectuals.¹⁰

7 I use the term cosmopolitanism in this chapter to refer to a variety of aspirational projects produced historically in the colonial and postcolonial worlds as well as within the contemporary field of cultural theory, broadly incorporating conversations across disparate cultural, religious, political, and linguistic groups. One of the foremost thinkers on contemporary cosmopolitanism, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes that "there are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more fundamental ties of shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously not just the value of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance." Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), xv.

8 Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London: Routledge, 2000), xii.

9 As I argue below, secular thought predates the postcolonial Indian state nationalist political doctrine of secularism.

10 Ismat Chughtai's own position with regard to secularism should be understood within the context of Nehruvian and post-Nehruvian India. For more on the secular, see Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert A. Yelle, and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo, eds., *After Secular Law* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Law Books, 2011);

Research on this Islamicate secular counters assumptions about the loyalties and worldviews of South Asian Muslims.

In using the term Islamicate humanism, I refer to the work of the historian Marshall Hodgson. For Hodgson, the term Islamicate does not “refer [...] directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims.”¹¹ By invoking this term, I do not mean to essentialize a timeless Islamic civilization; rather, I use it to acknowledge the literary, social, and intellectual roots of twentieth-century Urdu literature in older Islamicate knowledge systems, while at the same time recognizing that wide-ranging changes in the structure of education during the colonial period had significant impact on these knowledge systems which resulted in the disjuncture between Islamicate “tradition” and colonial “modernity.” The second element “humanism” refers to the frequently recurring theme of ecumenism within Islamicate religious thought. Already in the thirteenth century, the Arab mystic Muḥyī al-Dīn ibn al-‘Arabī had spoken of a “Religion of Love” (*dīn al-ḥubb*), which encompassed and transcended all manifestations of reality.¹² Such an idea was of crucial importance for much of pre-modern Sufi and ethical thought, and found frequent expression in poetry and literature. By consciously referencing the vocabulary of earlier forms of Islamicate humanism rather than the language of Western modernity, while at the same time retaining a

Markus Dressler and Arvind-pal Singh Mandair, eds., *Secularism and Religion-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

11 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), I: 59.

12 Husayn Ilahi-Ghomshei, “The Principles of the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry,” in *Hafiz and the Religion of Love in Classical Persian Poetry*, ed. and trans. Leonard Lewisohn (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 77–106.

distinction between the present and the past, Chughtai's work can thus be understood as an attempt to ameliorate the disjuncture between Indian tradition and colonial modernity, the so-called "tragedy of modernity in the non-West."¹³

Chughtai's work represents an often-ignored category of modern Muslim thought that has rejected the Islamic modernist ideal of religion, with its focus on literalist interpretations of scripture. Instead, Chughtai drew upon an older tradition of humanism found in the classical Urdu and Persian literary canon, translated into the modern context via an engagement with new forms of artistic expression such as realist short stories, novels and films in such a way that provided the conceptual conditions for an Indo-Muslim secular. Chughtai's work engaged in a back-and-forth between the particularities of certain religious practices, such as the commemoration of the martyrdom of Husain at Karbala and the veneration of shrines, and their universal implications for social progress. She also promulgated the idea of a "religion of humanity" (*mazhab-e insāniyat*),¹⁴ a humanist ethic that stood for the equality of human subjectivity, meaning that all people are entitled to autonomy in their personal choices and dignity in their lives free from social or economic injustice.

In this chapter, I commence with a history of the tradition of Indo-Muslim ideas of humanism and their relation to Islamic modernism. I then focus on the inheritance of these humanist traditions in Chughtai's autobiographical writings and in her novel *Dil kī Duniyā* (1962). I next address the question of secularism and Hindu-Muslim communal conflict in

13 Tabish Khair, "Modernism and Modernity: The Patented Fragments," *Third Text*, no. 55 (2001): 13.

14 "She found what she termed to as mazhab-e-insaaniat (religion of humanity) to be the best" M Asaduddin, *Ismat Chughtai* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999), 37. Asaduddin cites Afsar Fārūqī, "'Ismat Chughtā'ī se Inṭarvyū," *Tarsīl (Bombay)* 5, no. 17–18 (June 1988): 66.

modern India including a study of Chughtai's film *Garam Havā* (1973) and her short story *Muqaddas Farz* (1983). I argue that, by rejecting the inferior status of women within Muslim legal codes, Chughtai pursued what she saw as moral equality to a more radical degree than the postcolonial Indian state, which enshrined separate codes of personal law based on religious community. Ultimately, the secular ideals of equality, autonomy and human dignity were the mainstays of her thought, without regard to whether these were pursued through "Islamic" means.

Islamicate Humanism and the Multiple Strands of Secular Thought in South Asia

Ideas of religious tolerance and humanist ethics have a long history in Muslim and South Asian thought. While in formal Muslim jurisprudence, tolerance is only extended to the "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*),¹⁵ already in the early centuries of Islam, thinkers such as Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 757 CE) questioned the value of individual religions, writing "In not one of them did I find that degree of honesty and rightmindedness which would induce rational persons (*dhū al-'aql*) to accept their words and be satisfied with them [...] I have decided to limit myself to those deeds which all men recognize as good and which are in agreement with all religions (*tawāfiq 'alayhi al-adyān*)"¹⁶ Here Ibn al-Muqaffa' questioned the authority of any one form of religious thought over another, and instead only accepting that which is universally held to be true.

15 In practice, this term extended certain rights to Jews and Christians, with debates as to whether Zoroastrians, Sabians, Hindus, and Buddhists ought to be included. See Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

16 François de Blois, *Burzōy's Voyage to India and the Origin of the Book of Kalīlah Wa Dimnah*, Prize Publication Fund, vol. 23 (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1990), 26.

Later figures such as ibn al-Rāwandī and Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, whom Sarah Stroumsa has labeled the “freethinkers of medieval Islam,” went so far as to reject revelation and prophetic authority in its entirety, basing personal ethics entirely upon that which could be arrived at through the exercise of human reason.¹⁷ Ideas about the universality of religious truth and its ability to transcend formal religious boundaries were picked up in early Sufi literature and remained a constant theme throughout. The Persian poet Sa‘dī of Shiraz famously wrote in his influential *Gulistān*, “The sons of Adam are like the limbs of each another, since they were created from a single essence.”¹⁸ This theme, which I term Islamicate humanism (*insāniyat/ādamiyat*), that all of humanity is fundamentally interconnected regardless of religious affiliation, is found throughout Persian and later Urdu Sufi literature.¹⁹

In South Asia, the Hindu-Muslim encounter prompted extended reflection on the nature of religious plurality. Among Sufis, the esoteric belief in unity in multiplicity (*wahdat al-wujūd*, “The Unity of Being”) provided an important basis in accommodating diversity. Throughout the subcontinent, antinomian strands of Sufism led poets to identify with idolatry and infidelity in their rejection of exoteric (*ẓāhir*) Islam and their embrace of universal religion, as poets likened their desire for union with God to the love of an idolater for an idol.²⁰ This, combined with ideas

17 Sarah Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawāndī, Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and Their Impact on Islamic Thought*, Islamic philosophy, theology, and science, v. 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

18 *banī ādam a ‘zā-yi yakdīgar-and / ki dar āfarīnīsh zi yak gawhar-and*. W. M. Thackston, *The Gulistan, Rose Garden of Sa’di: Bilingual English and Persian Edition with Vocabulary*, [Classics of Persian Literature 7] (Bethesda, Md: Ibex Publishers, 2008), 22.

19 Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012).

20 Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India, 1200-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 81–114.

about the Islamic millennium in 1591-1592 CE, led to a period of inquiry into the universality of religious truth. After a series of debates between different religious communities in the Mughal capital, the Emperor Akbar declared an end to formal adherence to the traditional schools of Muslim jurisprudence. Instead, Akbar positioned himself as the Sufi paragon of the 'Perfect Man' (*insān-i kāmīl*) and initiated a new millennialist imperial religion, the "Divine Religion" (*dīn-i ilāhī*) at which the Emperor sat at the center as supreme lawmaker (*mujtahid*). Drawing upon the tradition of ethical texts like the *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, the role of the state was understood as existing to allow humans to fulfill their worldly needs and to prevent conflict among the subjects regardless of religious affiliation. For some seventeenth-century thinkers, such a task could only be accomplished by the Sufi ideal of the Perfect Man (*insān-i kāmīl*) through the institution of Divine Law (*nāmūs-i ilāhī*).²¹ Following this principle, Akbar instituted a new religious system founded on an ethic of tolerance, referred to as *ṣulḥ-i kull*, "Universal Harmony," in which the subjects of the empire would receive equal treatment regardless of religious affiliation.

It is here that the Muslim and global histories of the secular converge. As Rajeev Kinra has recently argued, the ability of different castes of Indians to work together during the reign of Akbar so impressed Sir Thomas Roe, Queen Elizabeth's ambassador, that he argued in British Parliament that the English should take up a similar position of tolerance to ethnic and religious minorities. Through speeches such as Roe's, the tolerance of the Mughal realm became known to the English public of the early Enlightenment period. For instance, Giles Shute, whose writings

21 Ibid., 60. It is important to note that such an interpretation of the role of the sovereign was not universally accepted. For instance, the ostensibly *sharī'a*-minded members of the Naqshbandī Sufi order, led by Aḥmad Sirhindī, are remembered as acerbic critics of Akbar's millennialist ideas (although see A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*, South Asia across the Disciplines (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 134–136 for an exploration of Sirhindī's own millennialist leanings.)

were read by John Locke, wrote of the Mughal Empire, “there are 88 several Casts of persons, under the Government of the Great *Mogull*; that is, 88 several Sects or Opinions: and yet notwithstanding, [...] they do not Persecute, or Molest, or meddle one with the others’ Perswasion or Opinion.”²² This is not to say that Islamicate humanist thought catalyzed the development of European ethics of tolerance, but rather that the strands of secular thought did not develop in complete isolation from one another, and therefore cannot be considered as wholly alien to one another.

By the late eighteenth century, with the onset of British colonialism in South Asia, individuals educated in the Islamicate tradition of humanist thought came to interact to greater extent with early European secularists. The Bengali thinker Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) became a prominent figure between European and American Unitarian Universalists, but in his Persian-language writings, he drew heavily upon the legacy of ethical works produced during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar.²³ European secular writings were translated into indigenous South Asian languages using the pre-existing discourse of Islamicate humanism. Thus, authors like Thomas Paine (1737–1809) and Auguste Comte (1798–1857) reached wide audiences in South Asia.²⁴

22 Cited in Kinra, “Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility The Global Historical Legacy of Mughal *Ṣulḥ-i Kull*.”

23 Patrick Wolfe, “Islam, Europe and Indian Nationalism: Towards a Postcolonial Transnationalism,” in *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective*, ed. Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (Canberra, Australia: ANU E Press, 2005), 233–65.

24 On Paine’s reception in Maharashtra, see Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*, Cambridge South Asian Studies, no. 30 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). On Comte’s impact on Bengal, see Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal*, 2nd ed (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Throughout this period, Urdu-language poets continued to employ literary tropes of infidelity and the religion of love, distancing themselves from rigid religious identities. The poet Mīr (1723-1810) for instance wrote, “Why are you asking Mīr now about his religion (*dīn-o-mazhab*)? He has drawn a Brahmin's mark, sat in a temple, and abandoned Islam ages ago!”²⁵ Likewise, the last poet laureate of the Mughal Emperor, Mīrzā Asadullāh Khān Ghālib, the first line of whose *dīvān* provides the title for Chughtai's autobiography, like many poets before him invoked the legacy of a Ṣan'ān, the famous apostate, who had fallen in love with a Christian maiden, writing “I am an infidel of love, and hell does not suit me; I have been burned by jealousy for the heat of Ṣan'ān.”²⁶ Idolatry and infidelity had become a *topos* of the premodern Persian and Urdu poetic “I”—as Ghālib said, “I will not quit worshipping that infidel idol, nor will people quit calling me an infidel.”²⁷ The tradition of Indo-Persian humanism finds strong resonance throughout Ghālib's writing.

With the exile of the last Mughal Emperor to Rangoon in 1858, India's Muslims were left without a ruler. As such, the respectability of the community could only be maintained by the personal piety of everyone in the community at large. Over the course of the nineteenth century,

25 *mīr ke dīn-o-mazhab kā ab pūchhte kyā ho unne to / qashqa khenchā, dair men baiṭhā, kab kā tark-e islām kiyā.* See Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Three Mughal Poets: Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 277.

26 *kāfir-i 'ishqam u dūzakh nabuvad dar khwar-i man / ghayrat-i garmī-i hangāma-i Ṣan'ān-am sūkht.* This couplet responds to the thirteenth-century poet Amīr Khusrāw's well-known line “I am an infidel of love; Islam is of no use to me. Every vein in my body is a thread; I have no use for a brahmin's cord” (*kāfir-i 'ishqam musalmānī marā dar kār nīst / har rag-i man tār gashta ḥājat-i zunnār nīst*). Cited in Annemarie Schimmel, *A Dance of Sparks: Imagery of Fire in Ghalib's Poetry* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979), 77.

27 *chhorūngā main na us but-e kāfir kā pūjnā / chhorē na khalq go mujhe kāfir kahe baghair.* Urdu Ghazal 59, line 5, discussed by Frances Pritchett online at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ghalib/059/59_05.html?urdu.

the traditional educated class (‘*ulamā*’) underwent a change from being scholars covering all areas of knowledge to specialists in religious knowledge, along with specialized educations and careers that established their position as religious leaders. The drastic changes that transformed Indian society during this period gave rise to a variety of ideological responses.²⁸

A crucial thinker to understanding the Muslim response to modernity is Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877–1938), who is presented in many scholarly texts as the modern Muslim South Asian thinker *par excellence*. Yet, I would argue that his thought had developed in a different direction from the tradition of Islamic humanism described above. Iqbāl drew from the language of classical Persian poetry to advocate for a renewed cohesion (‘*aṣabiyat*’) of the global Muslim community. Iqbāl held that the Muslim community had become degenerate both in morality and in political authority, in part due to the dissolution of communal cohesion after the early Islamic period. Turning the classical imagery of the idol-worshipper as lover of God on its head, Iqbāl lamented, “Gone are the iconoclasts—only idolaters remain. [...] In presentation you are Christians, in civilization, you are Hindus / These are supposed to be Muslims! Even the Jews look shamefully upon them.”²⁹ Iqbāl here criticizes what he sees as the deterioration of Muslims for imitating Christians and Hindus. The blatant anti-Semitism behind his claim that “even Jews” would be ashamed to see the abject state of the Muslim community is certainly worth noting as

28 See in particular Margrit Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

29 *but-shikan uṭh ga’e bāqī jo rahe butgar haiṇ / [...] waṣ‘ meṇ tum ho niṣārā, tau tamaddun meṇ hunūd / yih musalmān haiṇ jinhoṇ dekh ke sharmā’eṇ yahūd*. (Iqbāl, *Jawāb-e shikwa* 7, 17). See Muhammad Iqbal, *Complaint and Answer, Shikwa and Jawab-e Shikwa*, trans. A. J. Arberry (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1955). On Iqbal’s *Shikwa* and *Jawāb-e Shikwa* located within Iqbāl’s thought, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Gabriel’s Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, 2nd ed (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1989).

well. For Iqbāl, only through individual action and group solidarity could the Muslim community again achieve greatness. As Ayesha Jalal writes, “The core of Iqbal’s message to the Muslims of India was individual self-affirmation, *khudi*, leading to purposeful collective action.”³⁰ As such, Iqbāl was sharply critical of the Sufi tradition, which called for the annihilation of the self in union with the divine. In advocating for worldly action, Iqbāl focused on communal cohesion and boundary maintenance, and as such he rejected the Aḥmadiya religious movement, writing that such a movement was threatening to Muslim solidarity and could not be tolerated.³¹

On the other hand, the early Progressive Writers’ Movement also focused on collective action, but in contrast Iqbāl, on action oriented toward the cause of social and economic justice rather than civilizational restoration. According to the manifesto of the group, written by Mulk Rāj Ānand,

Indian literature, since the breakdown of classical culture, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in baseless spiritualism and ideality [...]. It is the object of our Association to rescue literature and other arts from the conservative classes [...]

We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence today—the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and unreason we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive.³²

For the Progressives, it was solidarity as Indians rather than as Muslims that was paramount to

30 Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty*, 178.

31 “It is in the interest of this eternal solidarity that Islam cannot tolerate any rebellion within its fold.” Muhammad Iqbal, *Islam and Ahmadism* (Lahore: Anjuman-e-Khudam-ud-Din, 1934), 30–31., cited in Naveeda Ahmed Khan, *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 118.

32 Mulk Raj Anand, “On the Progressive Writers’ Movement (1939),” in *Marxist Cultural Movement in India v. I*, ed. Sudhi Pradhan (Calcutta: Roopa Mudran, 1960), 20–21.

inciting action to combat social ills. The Progressives seized on earlier literary figures like Ghālīb and Kabīr as literary predecessors, perhaps due to the underlying humanism of their works.³³ Indeed, the Progressives even referred to themselves as “the most worthy guardians and inheritors of ancient literature.”³⁴ At the First All-India Writer's Conference in Jaipur, 1945, the Bengali linguist and participant in the Progressive Writer's Movement, Dr. Mohammad Shahidullah, attested to the writer's ability to transcend religious difference by opining,

I know Hindu literature derives its vision from the Vedas. I know that Muslim literature derives its vision from the Koran. But in all religions, there is a relative unity, a common factor of truth, and if we keep that before our eyes, I think we can rise above the pettiness which dominates or paralyzes our literatures [...] We must swear by a religion of humanity. Whether a man is Hindu or Muslim is a question of personal religion.³⁵

Here we see again the influence both of the Islamicate tradition of humanism and the Comtean tradition of “the religion of humanity.” This doctrine of secular humanism, contrasted from “personal religion” was an important theme that runs throughout the Progressive literature. Throughout Chughtai's writing, it is this idea of common humanistic morality, couched in the language of Islamicate humanism, that binds society together regardless of religious, gender, or socioeconomic status.

33 On the Progressive appropriation of Ghālīb, see Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 184–185.

34 *taraqqī pasand adab hī dar aṣl qadīm adab kā sab se mu'tabir amīn aur vāriṣ hai*. Khālilurrahmān A'zamī, *Urdū men taraqqī pasand adabī taḥrīk*, 2nd Edition (New Delhi: Qaumī Kaunsil barā-e Furogh-e Urdū Zabān, 2008), 69.

35 K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, ed., *Indian Writers in Council: Proceedings of the First All-India Writers' Conference (Jaipur, 1945)* (Bombay: The P.E.N. All-India Centre, 1947), 51.

The World of the Heart: Chughtai and the Tradition of Islamicate Humanism

Chughtai's work abounds in references to the Indo-Persian literary tradition. The very title of her autobiography, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan* (*The Robe is Made of Paper*) refers to the initial line (*maṭla'*) of the first *ghazal* of the Urdu poet *Ghālib*: *naqsh faryādī hai kis kī shokhī-e taḥrīr kā / kāghazī hai pairahan har paīkar-e taṣvīr kā*, "Whose mischievous writing is the picture suing over? / Every image-form wears a robe made of paper."³⁶ *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan* proceeds as far as 1946, one year before Indian independence, when Chughtai was tried for obscenity for writing the story "Liḥāf" (The Quilt) at the age of thirty-six. The question "Whose mischievous writing is the picture suing over?"³⁷ evokes a complaint of the separation of existent beings from the Creator, yet here the line serves as a fitting reference for the autobiography of a woman tried in court for her own kind of mischievous writing. The second line of the *ghazal*, from which the title is drawn, *kāghazī hai pairahan har paīkar-e taṣvīr kā* "the robe of every picture-form is made of paper," again alludes to the complaint of the picture, which stands in for all existent beings seeking redress of the cruelty of existence. *Ghālib* explains the metaphor of the paper garment by saying that in ancient Iran, a seeker of justice (*dād-khwāh*) would don paper garments before approaching the monarch to ask for redress.³⁸ The image of the paper garment, therefore, calls to mind a seeker of justice, an apt description for Chughtai herself, reflecting the abiding concern for justice in Chughtai's writing.

In *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, Chughtai repeatedly positions herself as the voice of

36 On the use of the poet *Ghālib* by Progressive writers, see above.

37 Or literally, of whose mischief of writing is the image the plaintiff?

38 Anjum Kḥalīq, ed., *Ghālib ke kḥuṭūṭ* (New Delhi: Ghalib Institute, 1984), v. 2, 438., cited by Francis Pritchett, "Divan-e Ghalib," accessed April 5, 2014, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ghalib/ghazal_index.html.

compassion in a cruel world. The archetypal sacrifices of Ḥusain and 'Alī Aṣḡhar remained abiding images in her work, and ultimately became the subject of her novel *Ek Qatra-e Khūn*.³⁹ In *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, she described the first time she understood the meaning of the songs of lamentation at a Muḥarram *majlis*, a gathering to commemorate the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusain and his family.⁴⁰ Though she belonged to a Sunni Muslim family, her account of the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusain as the archetypal example of injustice clarifies her appreciation for the power of religious expression. Recounting when she heard the story of 'Alī Aṣḡhar, the infant child of Ḥusain who was shot in the throat with an arrow, she wrote that she started crying loudly, after which, “the mourning women fell silent and looked at me in amazement. Perhaps they thought the long wait for *tabarruk* [consecrated food] had become unbearable [...] ‘Why was it shot? The arrow in the throat, why was it shot?’ I yelled in my usual way. No one answered my question.”⁴¹ Through her unheeded cries and desperate pleas for justice, Chughtai attempts to elicit compassion for the victims of even the most socially accepted suffering. The story of 'Alī Aṣḡhar is not simply about the tragic fate of the great-grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad; rather, it is a symbol for all innocents who have been killed or otherwise abused. The reader is left wondering why her elders did not answer her justice-beseeking questions.

39 The image of Ḥusain as partaking in a universal struggle for justice is one common among the Progressive Writers. See Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 161–202.

40 The commemoration of Husain is most usually associated with Shia Muslims, though it is clear from the context that her family had taken her to this gathering. Such devotional integration of the Karbala narrative is common to Sunnis and non-Muslims in South Asia and beyond.

41 *mātam karne-vālī bīviyāñ ek dam chup ho ga 'īn aur ba'ī ḥairat se mujhe dekhne lagīñ. samjhīñ shāyad tabarruk ke intizār kī zaḥmatēñ nāqābil-e bar-dāsht ho ga 'ī haiñ. [...]* 'kyūñ mārā? ḥalaq meñ tīr kyūñ mārā?' main ne ḥisb-e 'ādat machal machal kar pūchhā. kisī ne merī savāl kā javāb na diyā. Chughtā'ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 20–21.

For Chughtai, the novel and short story forms were powerful media to convey ideas about social justice as Chughtai's readers could experience sympathy through identification with the protagonists of her stories. The transgression of normative religion through religious madness as a means for women to escape constrictive social structures is the central theme of Chughtai's novel, *Dil kī Duniyā* (The World of the Heart, published 1962). The story is set in Bahraich, where the tomb of the saint Ghāzī Sayyid Sālār Miyān, also known as Bare Miyān (The Great Master), is located.⁴² The novel draws strongly on the Islamicate tradition of hagiography, yet rather than celebrating the piety of the novel's protagonists, Chughtai subverts the genre to the cause of humanist social justice in indicating that women should pragmatically use whatever means necessary to better their lives—even if it means feigning madness. Chughtai ironically has the narrator of the story, a young girl, indicate her own perspective on religious identity by pragmatically preferring to belong to whatever group is able to offer her the most sweets and entertainment. While setting the scene, the narrator recounts some myths associated with the tomb: “A long time ago, Rādhā Bā'ī, alias Zahrā Bībī, a child widow from a family in Radulī, lost her heart to Miyān. Ghāzī Miyān appeared to her in a dream and accepted her love.”⁴³ Once the long-deceased saint accepts her love, Rādhā Bā'ī moves into the shrine complex, but her father drags her away. In an allusion to the Hindu mythological story of Rādhā, the lover of Kṛṣṇa, the narrator continues:

rādhā nām kī sab hī laṛkiyān̄ barī ziddī hotī haiṇ. be-bāk dahāl apne 'ishq kā i 'lān kartī haiṇ. sārī zillatēn̄ aur badnāmiyān̄ haṇs ke jheltī haiṇ. [...] mukhtālīf

42 Ghāzī Sayyid Sālār (d. 1033 CE) was the nephew of Sulṭān Maḥmūd Ghaznavī, who had incorporated parts of northwestern India into the his empire. His tomb had already become the object of reverence during the period of the Delhi Sultanate.

43 *rādhā bā'ī 'urf Zahra bībī radulī kī bāl vidhvā miyān̄ ko dil de beṭhī. ghāzī miyān̄ ne use khvāb meṇ bashārat dī aur svikār kar liyā. 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī, Kullīyāt-e 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī: nāvil* (Dihlī: Kitābī Duniyā, 2002), 799.

*havā'ēn un ke jazba-e 'ishq ke āge sar jhukā detī haiñ. phir log un ke us jazba kī pūjā karte haiñ un kī shān meñ gīt gāte haiñ. aur unheñ devoñ kā asthān bakhshate haiñ.*⁴⁴

All girls named 'Rādhā' are very stubborn. Fearlessly and boldly they announce their love, they suffer every dishonor and stigma with a smile. [...] Opposing winds bow down before their passionate feelings. People begin to worship that emotion, sing songs in their honor, and finally give them the rank of gods.

In this striking passage, divinity is ascribed to women who suffer unbearably for unacceptable romantic attachments. The passage points to an intermingling of the human and the divine, particularly of *women* and the divine. This is also an example of Chughtai's familiarity with and desire to incorporate Hindu mythology and traditions into her literary world.

The story creates a dynamic whereby multiple parts and traditions that come together as part of the South Asian cultural heritage. Firstly, that the lover's name is marked Hindu, Rādhā, and that the saint and his shrine are marked Muslim, Ghāzī Miyān, presents a juxtaposition of the Hindu and the Muslim. Rādhā's love for Ghāzī Miyān is unacceptable because, as a widow, she is not entitled to passionate love by the dictates of her community. Further, her love for a Muslim saint crosses religious boundaries in an unacceptable way. For these reasons, Rādhā is tortured and killed by her family and community. Yet, the call for equality and fraternity between religious communities rings from houses of worship themselves. In the story, her mother beats her and her father whips her with a moistened rope, after which all of the villagers spit on her. It is at this point that, the narrator relates:

ghāzī miyān ne apne ānsū'ōñ se us ke zakhm dho'e use apnī muqaddas chātī se lagāyā. aur apne khūn-e jigar meñ shahādat kī unglī dabū kar us kī māng bhar dī. ṣubh savere radūlī-vāloñ kī ānkh khulī to mandiron meñ ghanṭe baj rahe the. aur masjid ke burj se azān gūñj rahī thī. rādhā chandan meñ basī shāhāna joṛā pahne phūloñ kī sej par abdī nīnd so rahī thī. jism par ek kharāsh kā nishān bhī na thā. kundan kī tarāḥ sharīr jagmgā rahā thā. [...]

44 Ibid.

*hindū usse rādhā kahte haiñ aur musalmān zahra bībī. mazār ke qadamon meñ us kī sāda qabr thī.*⁴⁵

Ḡhāzī Miyān washed her wounds with his tears, clasped her to his sacred chest, and dipping his forefinger, the finger he used to proclaim the oneness of god in prayer, into his heart's blood, he made the bridal mark in the parting of her hair [...] Early the next morning, when the Raduli-ites opened their eyes, temple bells were ringing and the call to prayer echoed from the minaret of the mosque. Immersed in the sandalwood, wearing a majestic outfit, and on a bed of flowers, Rādhā was in everlasting sleep. There was not even one scratch on her body. Like diamonds, her body was twinkling. [...] Hindus called her Rādhā, Muslims referred to her as Zahrā Bībī. Her simple tomb was at the foot of Miyān's shrine.

Ultimately, both communities adopted her as their own. Though seemingly distinct, the underlying religious truths of the community are different in name only. Religious boundaries are meant to be crossed, particularly in pursuit of love, and the physical presence of monuments to these crossings throughout South Asia serve as a physical testament to the similarity and equality of all people.

In *Dil kī Duniyā*, the women are painfully constrained by a limiting context where they are constantly told to disavow their wants and desires. Yet, even if only in death, the myth provides evidence of the power of a woman's desire and agency, against all odds, to create her own destiny. Hindus call her Rādhā, a name that references the lover of the god Kṛṣṇa, who also sacrificed herself to the object of her love. Muslims call her Zahrā Bībī, thus alluding to the honorific title of the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Fāṭima. Such religiously ambiguous tombs are commonplace in India, each with similar tales told by devotees.⁴⁶ Through the story of Rādhā Bā'ī/Zahrā Bībī, Chughtai indicated the ways in which South Asian women could use religion to escape the confines of their worldly situations. As a child widow, Rādhā would not have had the

45 Ibid., 800.

46 See Bellamy, *The Powerful Ephemeral*.

opportunity to marry and would be destined to a life without romantic and sexual fulfillment. Foregoing the boundaries of her community may have been the only choice she could make, given the circumstances,. Though it may seem that the community reasserts itself in the end by killing her, she is able to ultimately overcome the boundaries of her community. According to the pattern Chughtai sets up with relation to “girls named Rādhā,” the same community that condemned her will come to honor her. The retelling of the myth and the physical presence of her tomb attest to the power of Rādhā. At the same time, the story illustrates the ways in which members of different religious communities claim religious mythologies and figures as their own.

Through the stories in *Dil kī Duniyā*, Chughtai invokes an Indo-Persian mystical ideal of divine madness, in which saints lose themselves in all-consuming love for God. Yet, she inverts this pattern by suggesting that women instrumentalize this madness in order to break free from restrictive social pressure. Such stories of saintly devotion and madness are reflected multiple times in *Dil kī Duniyā*. Another such story is that of Pathānī Bū'ā, who has endured the tragedy of her would-be husband's drowning, along with his entire wedding party. After this accident, she goes mad and decides that she too is a beloved of Baṛe Miyān. Pathānī Bū'ā is able to escape the limitations forced upon other women through her insane behavior. The final tragic character, whose story forms the central plot of the novel, is Qudsiya, who lives in her natal home because her husband took a second wife while studying abroad in England but refuses to give Qudsiya a divorce. Though she has endured great hardship, she finally has her fill and lashes out when her mother tells her to accept her fate as that destined by god:

M: *terī phūṭī naṣīb beṭī. khudā kī marzī meṇ kis ko dakhāl hai?*

Q: *maiṇ ne khudā ke ḥuṣūr meṇ ko 'ī gustākhī kī thī kī mujhe yih saṣā milī aur vuh kamīna 'aish kar rahā hai?*

M: *bad-naṣīb! shauhar ko kamīna kahte sharam nahīn ātī? vuh terā khudā-e majāzī hai!*

Q: *la 'nat ho us kī ṣūrat par [...]*

M: *arī kam-bakht tujhe apne suhāg kā bhī mān nahīn? us ne ko 'ī gunāh to nahīn kiya. shar' meṇ chār nikāḥon kā hukm hai [...]* mard kī zāt hī be vafā hotī hai.⁴⁷

M: "It is your bad luck, daughter. Who can change God's will?"

Q: "Have I committed some mistake in God's presence that I have received this punishment while that bastard is enjoying life?"

M: "Unlucky one! Don't you feel ashamed calling your husband a bastard? He's your earthly God.

Q: "A curse upon his face!" [...]

M: "Oh, you wretched girl! You don't even have respect for your wedded state? He hasn't committed any sin, in the Sharī'a, up to four wives are commanded [...]
Man's nature itself is unfaithful."

In this case, normative religion is being used by Qudsiya's mother to put her in what is deemed to be her proper place. As a discarded first wife, she should accept her fate and not question the decisions made by her husband because he is the manifestation of God on Earth. (*khudā-e majāzī*). This term is commonly used in Urdu and references the belief that a husband is God's vicegerent for a wife and accordingly she must obey him. When Qudsiya insists upon continuing to curse her husband, her mother retreats to an argument based on an aspect of normative Islamic law, namely that men are allowed to take multiple wives. *Sharī'a* is here made out by her mother to be the ultimate measure of justice, because it is sanctioned by religious authorities. Next, the narrator describes Qudsiya's reaction to this retreat to Islamic law:

la javāb ho kar qudsiya khālā khud ko kosne lagīn.

Q: *yā allāh mujhe uṭhā le ay pāk parvardigār merī miṭī 'azīz kar le ki is 'izāb se to jān chūṭe. yā us mardūd ko maut de ki merā dam hī chhūṭe us nā-bi-kār se."*

N. *"arī churail yih tū kise kos rahī hai?"*

nānī bīvī kānp uṭhīn. shauhar phir shauhar hotā hai..

47 Chughtā'ī, *Kullīyāt-e 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī: nāvil*, 838–839. I have labeled the dialogues (M) for mother, (Q) for Qudsiya, and (N) for Nānī for the sake of clarity.

Finding herself speechless, Qudsiya Khālā began to curse herself.

Q: "Oh God! Please take me from here! Pure provider, make my body dirt so I can at least be rid of this punishment. Otherwise kill that reprobate so that so I can be free of him."

N: "Oh, you witch! Who are you cursing?"

Nānī Bīwī stood up, shaking. A husband is, after all, a husband.

The inability of her mother to accept Qudsiya's rejection of the injustice meted out to her leaves Qudsiya speechless. She expresses her rejection of this legalistic understanding of religion by appealing directly to God. Representing the ideals of the community, her grandmother, Nānī Bīwī, reiterates the impropriety of cursing one's husband. For the reader, all sympathies are with Qudsiya, and this moral fable illustrates the dangers that appealing to religion and custom can pose to women's autonomy and agency. Readers who identify with Chughtai's protagonist thus find themselves reflecting and questioning religious and community norms.

Like Rādhā Bā'ī and Pathānī Bū'ā before her, Qudsiya Khālā finds refuge in a religiously inspired madness, and the family comes to agree that she is possessed. Suddenly she is allowed to say whatever she pleases and is constantly attended by a man who recites devotional poetry to her. The narrator pokes fun at this change of events. "Clearly Qudsiya Khālā was not possessed by some ghoul that would command her to throw things. It seemed she was under the shadow of an exceedingly cultured, fashionable, and extremely fanciful saint."⁴⁸ Some Muslim thinkers such as Ashraf 'Alī Thānavī, discussed further in chapter three, blamed women for bringing superstition into the lives of Muslim families. Yet, as the narrator asks: "If by going mad, one rules both worlds then what idiot would want to come back to reality?"⁴⁹ Since reasonable

48 *yih to ṣāf zāhir hai ki khālā par ko'ī bhūt pret nahīn jo unheñ ko achhālne kī targhīb detā. ko'ī nihāyat mahzab feshan-ebal qism ke be-hadd shauqīn mizāj pīr mard kā sāya ma'lūm hotā thā.* Ibid., 843.

49 *agar hosh kho kar yūñ donon jahān kī bādshāhī mil jā'e to kaun kam-bakht hosh men ānā chāhegā?* Ibid., 844.

requests are not heeded, women resort to more creative means. *The World of the Heart* sheds light on the world of women's religiosity within the context of syncretic practice and from the perspective of women who can find empowerment in the creative use of religious idioms.

Indian Muslims and the Secular State

While she drew on a heritage of Indo-Muslim literature in her writing, Chughtai built upon older literary topoi to address the controversies surrounding religious identity in her lifetime. As a writer whose career spanned fifty years, Chughtai witnessed the formation and development of the Indian secular state. For Jawaharlal Nehru, the pioneer of Indian secularism, India's identity as a nation was defined by a transhistorical "unity in diversity," the conviction that at "almost any time in recorded history an Indian would have felt more or less at home in any part of India, and would have felt as a stranger and alien in any other country."⁵⁰ For Nehru, in recognition of the religious diversity of the Indian population, the secular state "honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities."⁵¹ Yet in practice, the secular policies of the early Indian state continued to privilege certain forms of communal authority over others, in particular through the maintenance of separate, communal personal law codes, a legacy of the colonial legal apparatus. In particular, Muslim personal law based on state-sanctioned interpretations of *sharī'a* was, and continues to be, a controversial aspect of the Indian secularist apparatus. Chughtai objected to a ritualistic understanding of Islam based on the *sharī'a*. In this respect, she was responding to Islamic modernists who sought to establish an understanding of Islam through an emphasis on the study of the Qur'ān and the Traditions (*aḥādīth*) of the Prophet

50 Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (London: Meridian Books limited, 1946), 62.

51 Sarvepalli Gopal, ed., *Jawaharlal Nehru, an Anthology* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), 330.

Muhammad. Chughtai held that the law should not discriminate based on religious community, and advocated the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code.

Questions regarding the interpretation and independence of Muslim Personal Law were most vociferously hashed out in the Indian public sphere around the Shah Bano case. In 1978, a 62-year-old woman named Shah Bano was divorced by her husband of 45 years, Mohammed Ahmad Khan, who refused to pay spousal maintenance apart from a single lump sum payment at the time of divorce. Shah Bano filed a petition with the local court in Indore, which was upheld in a 1979 ruling that she was entitled to maintenance. After an appeal in 1980, the High Court of Madhya Pradesh continued to uphold her right to maintenance and increased the amount to which she was entitled. A final appeal was taken to the Supreme Court of India, and in 1985, citing Muslim religious texts, the court ruled that a divorced woman had a right to alimony and dismissed the appeal. The Supreme Court's decision evoked an outcry from some Muslim leaders, in particular those who had organized the All-India Muslim Personal Law Board. The Indian National Congress government led by Rajiv Gandhi, fearing repercussions from disaffected Muslims in upcoming elections, used their supermajority in Parliament to effectively overturn the Supreme Court decision by passing the *Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act* in 1986, which decreed that a Muslim woman only be entitled to maintenance payments for the ninety-day period following the divorce (‘*iddat*’) during which she was not allowed to remarry.⁵² Women's groups like the All-India Democratic Women's Association organized protests against the deprivation of Muslim women of their right to spousal support. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main opposition party to the Indian National Congress,

52 On the Shah Bano case, see Sylvia Vatuk, “A Rallying Cry for Muslim Personal Law: The Shah Bano Case and Its Aftermath,” in *Islam in South Asia in Practice*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 352–67.

objected to what they termed the “appeasement” of Muslims and the presumed preferential treatment of the Muslim community. Here women's groups and Hindu nationalist found themselves in unexpected alignment.

During the period of debate, which led to the passing of the *Muslim Women Act*, the Indian press solicited opinions on the case from a number of Muslim celebrities. Chughtai took the opportunity to speak publicly about her belief that religion should not play a role in the public sphere. In a March 1986 interview for the magazine *Bombay* she advocated for the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code:

If the Muslims demand a separate law according to their religion, they should follow other rules that are followed in Pakistani and other Muslim countries as well. [...] Why should this one law be different from the rest of the country's laws? A Muslim who isn't prepared to follow the laws of his country has no right to live here and if he does not obey the law, he must be punished by law. After all, he is an Indian citizen, isn't he? If he committed murder, he would be hung, wouldn't he? They must obey the rules and regulations of the Indian Government: it isn't affecting their worship, their *namaz*, their *haj*, their mosque or their prayer [...]. But, they want all the benefits of the Indian Government and all the benefits of the Quranic law as well, is that right?⁵³

Her exasperated claim here, that no one is interfering with aspects of personal practice: prayer, pilgrimage and houses of worship, illustrates that for Chughtai, a clear distinction was drawn between the private sphere as the domain of religion and the public sphere as the domain of the state. Yet, by dismissing the concerns of those Muslims who consider personal law one of their last bastions of autonomy and self-determination, Chughtai's perspective, for better or worse, matched that used by Hindu nationalists who regularly appeal to the need for secularism in order to brow beat the Muslim community. Yet this did not appear to concern Chughtai. To her it seems the very notion of “personal law” was a hypocritical way of maintaining pre-existing

53 Indira Jaising, “A Matter of Politics,” *Bombay*, March 7, 1986, 55.

patriarchal structures through codes of laws that have an overwhelming impact on the lives of women—divorce, custody, and inheritance.

In opposition to those who affiliated strongly with their religious community, Chughtai expressed an identity as a secular Muslim thinker. When asked “do you consider yourself a religious person” by Javed Anand for an article in *The Sunday Observer* in 1990, Chughtai said:

The meaning of Muslim is one who believes in peace. I consider myself a Muslim because I believe in peace and according to me all those who really believe in peace, whether they be Hindus or Sikhs or Christians are also true Muslims. I also believe that Islam was really a great religion. There is much in it that is good for women. But Muslims have snatched away everything that Islam gave to women. Look at what a mess they have made of Pakistan. As for their bogus *Shariat* [sic] laws, I would refuse to take my case to a court where the evidence of one man is treated as equal to that of two women [...] for me religion is nothing, culture is everything.⁵⁴

Here Chughtai affirmed that justice should be based on secular humanistic morals rather than on inherited communal laws. This is a crucial distinction between Indian secularism and Islamic modernism, in Pakistan and elsewhere. Her expansive, indeed maximal definition of Islam transcends the narrow box of those who would seek to categorize her based on religion alone—rather, the cultural elements of her identity—as an Indian, a humanist, a Progressive Urdu author, a Communist, as a woman from a North Indian Muslim background—that distinguish her as a person and inform her own personal morality.

Yet, Chughtai was not opposed to religious practice and throughout her life, she participated in the religious rites of the diverse communities that she felt were part of her cultural heritage. In a piece written shortly after her death, Shehla Shibli recalled Chughtai's habit of crossing religious boundaries, writing:

54 Javed Anand, “Nanimaan of Forbidden Tales,” *The Sunday Observer*, August 12, 1990, 15.

below her flat in Marine Drive was a gurdwara. Ismat being a broadminded intellectual, had been used to wandering in and had soon befriended the inmates of the gurdwara known as Gurusevaks. As soon as she entered, they would serve her *hoy halwa* prepared with pure ghee. When they prayed, Ismat would stand up with them, and hold out her hands in the Islamic stance. When her family asked her what she did there, she would say, 'I say *fateha* the way I have been taught. That is the only kind of prayer I know. So while they say their prayers, I take the opportunity to say mine.'⁵⁵

Just as an earlier generation of poets blurred the lines between Hinduism and Islam, so too Chughtai continued to participate in ecumenical practices throughout her life. In an undated letter written at the end of her life she wrote, describing her religious outlook: "I am not an authority on Muslim law. I don't think I'm an ideal Muslim. I believe in good points of all religions. My father was a Free Mason.⁵⁶ When I asked the meaning he told me to find my own religion. And I did. I read Qur'an with meaning and Geeta with the help of the Pandit who used to perform Puja at the time of Muhurat⁵⁷ of my films."⁵⁸ By finding the "good points" in all religions, Chughtai prioritized her ideas on "the good" over the particularities of religious doctrine.

In addition to this theological argument, Chughtai used a cultural argument for why she was entitled to partake in the symbols of Hindu religious belief:

main musalmān hūn. but-parastī shirk hai. magar devmālā mere vaṭan kā virṣa hai. is meṇ ṣadiyon kā kalchar aur falsafa samoyā huā hai. īmān 'alāḥida hai,

55 Shehla Shibli, "'Kaghzi Hai Perahen,'" *Dawn*, November 15, 1991, 2.

56 On Freemasonry in colonial India, see Jessica Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasons and British Imperialism, 1717-1927* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

57 A *muhūrat* is a Vedic division of the day, which has auspicious or inauspicious qualities depending on astrological factors. It remains customary to begin filming a movie after performing a *pūjā* ceremony during an auspicious *muhūrat*.

58 Chughtai, undated letter (1983?), page 1, in the collection of Ashish Sawhny.

*vaṭan kī tahzīb 'alāhida hai. us meṇ merā barābar kā ḥiṣṣa hai jaise us kī miṭī
dhūp aur pānī meṇ*⁵⁹

I am a Muslim. Worshipping idols is akin to infidelity.⁶⁰ Yet the tales and legends of gods are my nation's inheritance. Encompassed within them are centuries of culture and philosophy. Faith is one thing; the culture of one's homeland is another. I am entitled to an equal share of it, just as I am entitled to an equal share of its earth, sunshine and water.

Here Chughtai makes a distinction between “faith” (*īmān*) and “culture” (*tahzīb*), claiming that as an Indian she is just as entitled to participate in the cultural heritage of her country as anyone else. For Chughtai, faith and worship (*parastish*) are not in conflict; she claims to have transcended sectarianism, and is adamant that she would only abide by the aspects of religion that appealed and made sense to her. In the sectarian context of Partition and post-Partition South Asia, in which Muslim and Hindu nationalist discourses sought to differentiate one from the other,⁶¹ Chughtai's cosmopolitan practice instead reflects the equating of religious traditions. Chughtai was certainly not alone in her humanist values; rather, she represented a milieu of progressive thought among certain intellectuals in mid-twentieth century India. For Chughtai, humanism is equated with Progressivism. She explained in a 1972 interview,

It lived long before we gave it a name. I think that Bhakta Kabir⁶² was a Progressive writer. I think all people who have said something good and nice for the good of humanity are Progressive writers. And they didn't start in '35 or '36

59 Chughtai, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 34–35.

60 In Islamic religious vocabulary means creating partners with God.

61 On religious nationalism in South Asia, see Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

62 A fifteenth-sixteenth century mystic whose poetry is remembered for espousing the equality of mankind.

only. They've existed in the past, only this name was not applied to them then. And they'll go on existing forever.⁶³

For Chughtai, then, Progressivism is ultimately the most universal of all universalisms, trumping even those claims made by particular religious groups. Just as she alluded to universal experiences through intricately constructed characters and events, so too did she allude to what she saw to be universal wisdom in the guise of particular religious expression. It is this ability to generalize from the specific that makes her continually relevant in the Indian context.

Beyond Islam

This dissertation explores Chughtai's work as an example of Indo-Muslim secular thought. By deprivileging the role of religion in the self-formation of her characters, Chughtai challenges dominant, communalist modes of analysis that emphasize normative and authoritarian positions regarding religious identities. In both scholarly and popular circles, the very existence of a secular Muslim intellectual sounds discordant. Yet perhaps this is a productive space to question that assumed discord. For comparison, there is a long history of studies on secular Jewish thought.⁶⁴ Yet for various reasons, secular Islamic thought sounds like an oxymoron.⁶⁵ Popular articles abound on the incompatibility of Islam and secularism. Here it is important to refer to Amartya Sen's notion of multiple identities—that, for instance, Muslims are never just

63 Carlo Coppola, "Mahfil Interviews Ismat Chughtai," *Mahfil* 8, no. 2/3 (1972): 172.

64 On the history of Jewish secular thought, see most recently David Biale, *Not in the Heavens: The Tradition of Jewish Secular Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011).

65 The very phrase "secular Muslim thought" returns only one result on the Internet search engine Google, while "secular Jewish thought" has 16,300 results.

Muslims, but also have multiple affiliations and commitments to other groups and categories.⁶⁶

The study of Indo-Muslim culture can—indeed should—take the same path in order to reveal previously unexplored avenues of thought.

Secularism does not simply mean non-religious, or in opposition to religion. According to anthropologist Talal Asad in his book *Formations of the Secular*,

secularism is not simply an answer to an intellectual question about enduring peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion. In contrast, the process of mediation enacted in 'premodern' societies includes ways in which the state mediates local identities without aiming at transcendence.⁶⁷

The very act of subsuming religious, gender and class identity and assuming an equality regardless of these identifications is part of the secular framework of the modern period. The problem of Muslim secularism seems particularly confined to studies of the modern period. There is no doubt that freethinkers existed in the medieval Islamic world.⁶⁸ In studies of the modern period there appears to be a consistent discomfort when it comes to issues of Muslim authenticity. The drawback to applying the term “secular” to Chughtai's work, or acknowledging that she was strongly inspired by European realist literature, is that she may be labeled as an inauthentic, derivative intellectual by those who maintain a fundamental civilizational difference between Muslim societies and the “West.”

66 See Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, 1st ed, Issues of Our Time (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 59–83.

67 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 5.

68 See Stroumsa, *Freethinkers of medieval Islam*.

The straitjacketing of Muslim intellectuals into what are deemed Islamic norms and traditions has found its way into studies of the Progressive Writers' Movement. In a recent dissertation authored by Sarah Waheed, for example, the Progressive writers are primarily defined by their Muslim heritage. Waheed writes,

Islam, more accurately described as a way of life rather than a religion, values the autonomy of the Muslim as individual in relation to his Creator. [...] It is this balance between individual and community, in which responsibility to the community justifies the individual's right to an autonomy curtailed only by complete submission to the will of Allah, which has been open to different appropriations in various spatial and temporal contexts in Muslim communities. This is, as is argued throughout this dissertation, what also explains the ethical imperatives of socialist and left-leaning Urdu intellectuals of the decolonization era, who demanded equity, justice, and freedom within the political struggles of their time.⁶⁹

Further, while Waheed claims that "Islam is a way of life rather than a religion," such a statement seems to deny the possibility of compatibility of Islam and secularism. The distinction between a "way of life" and a "religion" seems to be that "religion" belongs to the private sphere while a "way of life" is a totalizing system of practice. At any rate, adherents of all major religions claim that their religion is "a way of life," rendering any meaningful purpose of this statement rather unclear. Further, Waheed refers to a normative "Islam" without reference to the sources she draws upon to make her claims. This type of reading reifies Muslims as always connected to an "Islamic" past. In this dissertation, I contest the polarity between Islam and the Other.

Within the field of Islamic studies, and particularly in studies on the perceived incompatibility of Islam with secularism, the work of Talal Asad has promulgating what I argue

69 Sarah Waheed, "Radical Politics and the Urdu Literary World in the Era of South Asian Nationalisms c.1919 - 1952" (Ph.D., Tufts University, 2011), 7–8.

is an overly narrow understanding of what it means to be a Muslim. For example, Asad critiques Michael Gilson who he claims,

emphasizes in his recent book *Recognizing Islam* that no form of Islam may be excluded from the anthropologist's interest on the grounds that it is not the true Islam. [...] The idea he adopts from other anthropologists—that Islam is simply what Muslims everywhere say it is—will not do, if only because there are everywhere Muslims who say that what other people take to be Islam is not really Islam at all.⁷⁰

Rather than accepting the claims of all Muslims to their religion, Asad asserts that Islam is a “tradition” which he defines as consisting: “essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history.”⁷¹ I find this line of thinking particularly troubling in light of his assertion that accepting every Muslim's claims on Muslimness “will not do.” Thus, only certain claims to history must be considered acceptable. In a footnote in *Genealogies of Religion*, he succinctly points out his reaction to the idea that there could be many Islams: “There are, it is true, several Islamic traditions (which is why the clumsy anthropological claim that there are several “Islams” appears to some to be plausible [...]). But the several Islamic traditions are related to one another formally, through common founding texts, and temporally, through diverging authoritative interpreters.”⁷² His claims lead one to wonder who, in his view, has the authority to interpret. Certainly not Muslims like Chughtai.

70 Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 2.

71 Ibid., 14.

72 Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 236.

It is my contention that the need for the word “secular” with relation to Chughtai's thought is based upon her rootedness as a modern Indian Muslim. As the philosopher Akeel Bilgrami has argued, secularism became necessary when,

in the post-Westphalian European context, there emerged a need for states to seek their legitimacy in ways that could no longer appeal to outdated ideas of the divine rights of states as personified in their monarchs. This new form of legitimacy began to be sought by the creation of a new form of political *psychology* in a new kind of subject, the ‘citizen,’ of a new kind of entity that had emerged, the ‘nation.’ It was to be done, that is, by creating in citizens a *feeling* for the nation, which generated a legitimacy for the state because the nation was defined in tandem, in hyphenated conjunction, with a certain kind of increasingly centralized state. This nation-state was to be legitimized by this feeling among its subjects, a political-psychological phenomenon that would somewhat later come to be called “nationalism.” [...] that is to say, in a context of modernity in which a very specific trajectory of nation-state formation was central.⁷³

Thus, the idea of the secular is a product of the experience of citizenship in modern nation-states. Asad argues that as secularism emerged in Europe it is always formed with Muslims as “other.” While South Asian secularism has also revolved around the “Muslim question,” like Europe, South Asia has also been indelibly changed by the experience of citizenship through independence from colonialism and partition into modern nation states. I argue, along with Bilgrami, that the rise of religious nationalisms in South Asia, in particular, makes this need for secularism apparent.⁷⁴ It is this changing South Asian context to which Chughtai's work belongs.

The project of the Progressive Writers writ large, to introduce change to society, fits with Bilgrami's definition of a secularism “that takes its own commitments to be true and holds out

73 Bilgrami, “Secularism: Its Content and Context,” 25–26.

74 “the openly vocal and activist form of majoritarian Hindu nationalism that has emerged in the country since the passing of Gandhi, Nehru, and some of the other leaders of the older generation, has made something like secularism seem much more obviously relevant for India than it seemed to Gandhi when he was writing about these matters during the very early period of the freedom movement.” Ibid., 27.

for them against opponents, given the possibility that history will inject conflicts in their opponents' thinking so as to make them come around to [secularism]'s commitments by the internal reasons that those conflicts might introduce into their opponents' moral-psychological economies."⁷⁵ Chughtai was not willing to bend in favor of appeasing religious commitments or norms. Her advocacy for gender, sexual and economic justice was paramount. For Chughtai, secularism did not mean multiculturalism as it has been defined by scholars. As Bilgrami writes, "[i]n the context of an aspiring multiculturalism, one wants to improve on or replace the attitude of disapproval with some other moral psychological attitude that cultures (including secular cultures) must exhibit toward one another, [...] The other is to stress a more positive attitude: *respect* rather than disapproval."⁷⁶ Yet, Chughtai did not respect all traditions. In fact, she had equal disdain for all traditions that she deems oppressive. Even her use of religious idioms does not contradict this secular commitment. As Bilgrami clarifies: "[t]here is no reason to think that" secularism "cannot display its own wisdom and appeal by showing how the ideals it seeks have their echoes (or presentiments) in *religious traditions*."⁷⁷ I acknowledge that the suspicion of the term "secular" does have some merit in the current geopolitical climate.⁷⁸ Yet this does not mean that we should shy away from using the term when it is indeed applicable.

75 Ibid., 47–49.

76 Ibid., 53.

77 Ibid., 55.

78 "[E]specially since the hostilities generated by a trigger-happy 'war on terror,' all over Europe and indeed more widely in the West (in countries such as Canada, for instance) it is *majoritarian* sentiment that has increasingly appealed to secularism as a stick with which to beat the very ideal of multiculturalism, an ideal that they view as being soft on minority religious cultures." Ibid., 60.

Indian Roots and Communal Winds of Partition

For Chughtai, one of the most pernicious effects of bringing religion into the public sphere was the communalism that surrounded the event of Partition. Partition is the archetypal trauma explored in South Asian literature and film. The treatment of Partition in a particular work of art can allow us to investigate the complex relationships between nationalism, religiosity, and modernity. Chughtai engaged creatively with the subject of Partition on a number of occasions, including in her screenplay for the film *Garam Havā* (Scorching Winds, 1973), the film for which she received the most critical acclaim during her career, including the President's Award for Best Film Story.⁷⁹ She wrote this story in response to a request by the film writer Shama Zaidi.⁸⁰ *Garam Havā* tells the story of an Indian Muslim family's plight after Partition. The film opens with a poem by Kaifi Azmi, read as images of Gandhi's assassination are shown on the screen. Azmi's poem highlights the message all suffered equally from and were equally responsible for the violence during Partition:

*taqsīm hu'ā mulk
to dīl ho ga'e tukṛe
har sine meṇ tūfān
vuhāṇ bhī thā, yihāṇ bhī*

When the country was partitioned,

79 *Garam Hawa* is an iconic film. *The Essential Guide to Bollywood* describes *Garam Hawa* as "a poignant and authentic depiction of the trauma following the partition of India and Pakistan, and the dispossession of the Indian Muslims that followed, as they careened between their old home and new land." Subhash K. Jha and Amitabh Bachchan, *The Essential Guide to Bollywood* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2005), 53. *Garam Hawa*'s "classic" status is further supported by *The India Times* listing of *Garam Hawa* as one of the "25 must-see films of all time." Journalist Rachna Kanwar writes, "*Garam Hawa* is one of the most sensitively made films on the Indo-Pak partition. It doesn't have the usual melodrama and Pak bashing." Rachna Kanwar, "25 Must See Bollywood Movies," *India Times: Movies*, October 3, 2005.

80 Zaidi is also the wife of the director of the film M.S. Sathyu.

Sacred Duty: Ismat Chughtai's Cosmopolitan Justice between Islam and the Secular

Hearts were torn asunder
In every breast, a storm.
It happened there just as it did here.

ghar ghar meṇ chitā jalī thī
lahrāte the sho 'le
har shahr meṇ shamshān
vuhāṇ bhī thā, yihāṇ bhī

In every house, funeral-pyres burned.
The flames blazed up
In every city, crematoria
It happened there just as it did here.

nā gītā kī ko 'ī suntā
nā qur'ān ko 'ī suntā
ḥairān sā īmān
vuhāṇ bhī thā, yihāṇ bhī.

No one listened to the Gītā,
No one listened to the Qur'ān.
It was as though faith itself was stunned.
It happened there, just as it did here.

The final verse in particular, which claims that during Partition, no one listened to the Qur'ān or the Gītā, contrasts communal violence in the name of religion with underlying the message of religion. Religions are also at a distance from the happenings of human beings.

In the film, Salīm Khān is the owner of a shoe manufacturing company. Despite the fact that many of the Muslims in the city, including Salīm's own brother and sister, move to Pakistan, he decides to stay in Agra. This decision is buoyed by the need to care for his aged mother who refuses to leave her ancestral home. Tragedy after tragedy strikes the family. Their business collapses due to the unwillingness of moneylenders to give loans to Muslims who, it was feared, could potentially abscond to Pakistan. They lose their home when the property is deemed abandoned because the deed to the house was under the name of Salīm's brother who left for Pakistan. Their son Sikandar is unable to find work. Yet the most tragic aspect of the film relates

to the love and marriage prospects for Salīm's daughter Amīna. After being jilted by two lovers, both of whom abandon her and migrate to Pakistan, she kills herself in the most dramatic scene of the film.

In line with Chughtai's secularizing project, Salīm's dependence upon God to protect the family is a main site of ridicule. At every painful turn, the viewer finds Salīm seeking refuge in God and saying that something good will come out of whatever happens. Similar to Voltaire's *Candide*, which satirizes the notion of Divine Providence, the film sends the message that instead of taking care of the needs of his family, Salīm carelessly leaves everything up to God. The film's most striking example of the wrongheadedness of this mentality is when his daughter receives news that her second love interest has abandoned her. Salīm says "something good must come of this for our daughter." Almost as a direct retort to his blind faith, the next scene is the one in which she commits suicide. This act is the ultimate rejection of Salīm's philosophy. What could possibly be good about his daughter's suicide? In my reading, his reliance of faith alone allows his family to be abused and ultimately leads to his daughter taking her own life. Rather than faith, the film calls for action to end suffering and work towards justice, by pointing to protest as the only legitimate way to ameliorate the family's situation. At the very end of the film, after all of the tortures that the family endures, Salīm agrees to move to Pakistan. Yet on the way to the railroad station, his son Sikandar jumps off the horse-carriage to join a Communist protest. Salīm does the same and sends his wife back to their home. They abandon their plan to emigrate Pakistan, instead remaining in India to fight for their rights as citizens of the new nation. Here, the didactic message is clear—the Khān family is treated unfairly due to their religious affiliation and action must be taken to combat that injustice. In contrast to thinkers

like Iqbāl, the prescribed action is not the refinement of the pious self but rather secular protest against social inequality in India through communism.

Garam Havā was not Chughtai's only work to deal with the struggles that faced Indian Muslims after Partition. Though it is often claimed that *Garam Havā* is based on Chughtai's story "Chauthī Kā Joṛā," (The Fourth-Day Outfit), the film bears a much stronger resemblance to her short story "Jareṇ" (Roots, 1952). This story revolves around two neighboring families who are intimately entwined in each other's lives.

As the narrator tells us,

*Rūpchandjī hamāre khāndānī dāktar hī nahīṇ abbā ke purāne dost the. dāktar ṣāhib kī dostī abbā se, un ke beṭon kī bhā'iyon se, bahu'on kī hamārī bhā'ojoṇ se aur na'ī pod kī na'ī pod se. āpas meṇ dānt kāṭī roṭī thī. donoṇ khāndānoṇ kī maujūda tīn perhiyāṇ ek dusre se aisī ghilī milī thīṇ ki shubah bhī na thā ki hindūstān kī taqsīm ke ba'd us muḥabbat meṇ phūṭ par jā'egī.*⁸¹

Rūpchand was not only our family doctor but he was also Abbā's old friend. The doctor was friends with Abbā, his sons were friends with my brothers, his daughters-in-law were friends with my sisters-in-law, and the little ones were friends with each other. They would break bread together. The three generations of these two families were so mixed up with each other that there was no hint that the Partition of India would impact that love.

Though the politics of looming Partition stood far from their minds, the reader is made aware that Partition will, in fact, have an impact on their love for each other by emphasizing that at this point "there was no hint."

By providing examples from everyday life, Chughtai emphasized the sameness of both families. "Far from politics, Ammāṇ and Chāchī would discuss coriander, turmeric and their daughters' dowries. The daughters in law were busy copying each other's fashion choices."⁸²

81 'Ismat Chughtā'ī, 'Ismat Chughtā'ī ke aḥsāne. *Jild-e duvvum* (Dihlī: Kitābī Duniyā, 2006), 143.

82 *ammāṇ aur chāchī siyāsāt se dūr dhaniye haldī aur beṭiyon ke jahizon kī bāten kyā kartīṇ aur bahu'eṇ ek dusre ke feshan churāne kī tāk meṇ lagī rahtīṇ.* Ibid., 144.

When the narrator's father, Abbā, is paralyzed and eventually dies, it is Rūpchand who takes care of their family, making sure the children's school fees are paid and ensuring dowries for the marriages of daughters.

Yet things change after Partition. The two families grow apart and the narrator's siblings and their families decide to migrate to Pakistan. The narrator's mother, however, refuses to go along with the plan of migration:

*śirf anmān kī zabān gung rahī. āj se nahīn vuh pandara agast se jab dākṭar śāhib ke ghar par tarangā jhaṇḍā aur apne ghar par līg kā jhaṇḍā lagā thā. [...] in do jhaṇḍon ke darmiyān mīlon lambī choṛī khalīj hā'il ho ga'ī jis kī bhayānak gaharā'ī ko vuh apnī ghamgīn ānkhoṇ se dekh dekh kar larzā kartīn.*⁸³

Only Ammān's tongue was mute. Not just on that day, but since the fifteenth of August when the tricolor was hoisted on the roof of Dr. Saheb's house and the Muslim League flag on ours. [...] Between those two flags there stood a miles-wide desert whose terrifying depth she would look at again and again with her sad eyes.

Ammān prefers to stay in the home where she has spent her life, even if it means that she must stay there all alone. When Rūpchand sees the children of the narrator's family leave and observes the now empty home across the street, he is devastated: "he was pulling with all his strength at things that had entwined themselves into his very existence, like roots, but it was as if his own flesh was being pulled up along with them."⁸⁴ Reflecting the title of the story, the pain of separating these interwoven roots is unbearable. Since Rūpchand leaves suddenly and by car, the reader might assume he too is running away from the social trauma of Partition. Yet at the end of the story we learn that he had gone to the train station to convince Ammān's family to return. As

83 Ibid., 146–147.

84 *jaṛon kī tarah jo chīz un ke vujūd meṇ jam chukī thī vuh use pūrī tāqat se khench rahe the magar sāth sāth jaise un kā gosht khenchtā chalā ātā ho.* Ibid., 151.

in *Garam Havā*, despite all obstacles, Indian Muslims are exhorted to remain in India, resist the scorching winds of communal discord and stay in the land of their roots.

The question of the place of Muslims in post-Partition India was a complicated one, even for Chughtai. Her elder sister Azmat's husband was killed during the so-called police action in Hyderabad, when the princely state was forcibly integrated into the Indian union.⁸⁵ However, her faith in the potential of a cosmopolitan India did not falter. Unlike many of her friends and family members, Chughtai decided to stay in India in 1947. Yet she maintained connections with those in Pakistan, and ultimately visited them. Upon her return from her first trip to Pakistan in 1976, Chughtai wrote: "Bombay is calling me back, but Karachi appears to hold me back. It seems as if I am traveling from one world to another [...] How does one cut oneself off from the three brothers who lie buried in the dust of Pakistan? We were born of the same mother, how do I now draw myself away from those who were part of my own flesh and blood?"⁸⁶ In spite of the difficulties her family endured at Partition, the corpses of her deceased family members buried under Pakistani soil viscerally embodied Chughtai's connections to Pakistan. By emphasizing "flesh and blood," Chughtai reiterated the significance of the human without reference to the borders and religious identities that separate these human bodies. South Asia is itself a type of flesh and blood homeland that the roots discussed in her stories and films are deep within India and Pakistan.

85 For more on the history of the princely state of Hyderabad, see Eric Lewis Beverley, "Muslim Modern: Hyderabad State, 1883–1948" (Ph.D., Harvard University, 2007).

86 M.H. Askari, "A Grande Dame Bows Out," *Newsline (Karachi)*, November 1991, 99.

Secular Resistance in Sacred Duty ("Muqaddas Farz," 1983)

In Chughtai's literary world, as so-called "enlightened" Hindus and Muslims attempted to form close alliances in the late colonial period, the taboos of communal mixing continued to cause difficulty and awkwardness in relationships. The story "Sacred Duty" ("Muqaddas Farz," published in 1983), details the elopement of a Muslim woman and a Hindu man. The story centers upon the reaction of their parents.⁸⁷ After revealing the contents of a note detailing Samīna's civil marriage to Tashār Trīvedī, and conspicuously signed by Samīna Trīvedī, the narrator exclaims "God protect us! Şiddīqī Şāhib believed in modern ideas. He agreed with educating girls and marrying them according to their preference. This didn't mean that his blood wouldn't boil when his daughter went astray."⁸⁸ Here, Chughtai pokes fun at the superficial progressivism of her contemporaries. Religious boundaries persist despite Şiddīqī Şāhib's "modern ideas." It is this incomplete acceptance of secular ideals that Chughtai criticizes in this story.

The idea of *sharāfat*, "respectability", remained a paramount concern for middle-class Muslims, and despite the supposed "modern outlook" (*māḍarn khiyālāt*) of Mr. Şiddīqī, his outrage reveals that in his mind education is really a matter of better training girls to fit into the patriarchal family. The Şiddīqīs tell themselves: "We bear no hatred towards Hindus. Every Sunday Pappū has a festive gathering. One doesn't even remember who is Hindu and who is

87 Chughtai had firsthand knowledge of intermarriage: her daughter Seema married Naveen Sawhny, a man of Punjabi Hindu origin, in 1968.

88 *khudā kī panāh. şiddīqī şāhib māḍarn khiyālāt ke ḥāmī the. laṛkiyon ko ta 'līm dalānā shādī kī marzī se karnā, sab hī kuchh mānte the. magar us kā yih maṭlab to nahīn beṭī gumrāh ho jā'e aur un kā khūn na khole. 'Işmat Chughṭā'ī, 'Işmat Chughṭā'ī ke afsāne. Jild-e chahārum* (Dihlī: Kitābī Duniyā, 2006), 99.

Christian.”⁸⁹ Yet, ownership and control of their daughters' sexuality and marriage is the ultimate red line in community relations. Here the norms of marital boundaries between religious communities serve as an infringement on the autonomy of women and men. These persistent boundaries called for the continued importance of secular ideals.

Chughtai dealt with the serious subject of parents wanting to kill their own daughter and her husband in her characteristically comical style. In the story, the Şiddīqīs debate the virtues of killing the lovers outright:

*ab beṭī aur kamīne dāmād ko qatl karne ke li' e ko'ī tez chhurī bhī ghar meṇ nahīṇ. pistol kī to bāt chhoṛo. lā'isins ke hazār laṭṭe kyā patta thā varna koshish kī hotī to mil hī jātā. bahut rusūkh hai allāh kā diyā. jab tak pistol milegā nā-murād ke bāl bacha ho jā'egā. bāl bache ke khyāl se aur bhī khūn khadbadāne lagā.*⁹⁰

there wasn't even a sharp knife in the house with which they could kill their daughter and bastard son-in-law, so forget about a gun. Who knows what business would be involved in getting a license, though, if they'd tried they probably would have gotten one since they were so blessed by God. Even so, by the time the pistol would arrive, the unfortunate ones would already have produced children. The thought of children made the blood boil.

Parents killing children who arrange their own marriages was and is a grim reality. Yet, in this story, these intentions are rendered ridiculous by focusing on the bureaucracy involved in procuring a pistol rather than on the intentions themselves. Chughtai's use of comic relief was one of her most powerful tools to encourage the type of questioning and rethinking that Bilgrami proposes as a characteristic of the secular.

Ultimately, the moral of the story is conveyed in the form of a letter from the couple after they escape from both sets of parents who had insisted that the outside partner “convert” and

89 *hindū' on se ko'ī ber nahīṇ hai har itvār papū kī baiṭhak jamtī hai yād bhī nahīṇ rahtā kaun hindū hai kaun 'īsā'ī.* Ibid.

90 Ibid., 100.

participate in a marriage ceremony from within their own religious tradition. The letter reads:

*hamārā ko 'ī ek mazhab nahīn sāre mazhab us bhagvān ne bakhshe haiṇ purī
insāniyat kī daulat haiṇ, use goḍ bhī kahte haiṇ āp use sirf khudā ke nām se
pahchānte haiṇ magar ham use pahchānte haiṇ hazāron nāmon se vuh jo kan kan
meṇ rachā huā hai:
jo rahmvālā aur mihrbān hai (qur'ān-e sharīf)
jo andar bhī hai bāhir bhī
ūpar bhī nīche bhī
andhere meṇ bhī ujāle meṇ bhī
ḥāzīr meṇ ghā'ib meṇ bhī
nā'īn bhī hān meṇ bhī (bhagvat gītā).⁹¹*

We don't have any one religion, all religions are provided by God (Bhagvān),
they are the inheritance of all of humanity. He is sometimes called "God," you
would only recognize him by the name "Khudā," but we recognize him in
thousands of names, he who rings in every ear.
The one who is merciful and kind (Qur'ān)
Who is inside and outside
Up and down
In the darkness and in the light
In the visible and in the invisible,
In negation and in affirmation (Bhagvad Gītā).

Here, Chughtai's protagonists claim a secular identity drawn from an idea of universal religion,
implying that the *Qur'ān* and the *Bhagvat Gītā* share the same fundamental truth, ultimately
resonating strongly with the Islamicate tradition of humanism discussed at the beginning of this
chapter. Drawing on traditions of God's names (Arabic *al-asmā al-ḥusna* "The Beautiful
Names", Sanskrit *sahasranāma* "The Thousand Names"), the protagonists argue to their parents,
and readers, that truth is found in many places.

Irreverent to the Last: The Funeral of Ismat Chughtai

91 Ibid., 114.

In his flat in the Mumbai suburb of Bandra, Ashish Sawhny maintains a bedside shrine inspired by the one that belonged to his grandmother Ismat Chughtai (Figure 1.1). The shrine contains symbolic elements from a variety of Indian religious traditions. A stone statue of the Virgin Mary stands wrapped in Muslim prayer beads (*tasbīḥ*) and a plastic chain necklace of a crucifix. An image of the Buddha, sitting with legs folded, beams serenely,⁹² while the familiar image of Sarasvatī, goddess of learning and literature, plays the *vīṇā* with her four arms. A plastic lamp inscribed with the syllable *om* flickers in the darkness. A small, abstract statue of Ganesh, the remover of difficulties, stands at the front of this pantheon, next to another rotund Buddha, while the smiling Iranian Zoroastrian guru Meher Baba smiles mischievously from his portrait.⁹³ This potpourri of Indian religious icons points to the store of religious images Chughtai chose to deploy in her stories, as well as in her own fashioning of her literary persona.⁹⁴ Chughtai's characters belong to a variety of religious communities and her own practices of self presentation incorporated a variety of religious practices as well.

92 Chughtai reflected in her autobiography that Buddhism had a great impact on her but I have not found any other references to Buddhism in her work. See Chughtā'ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 33. Buddhism had been prominently associated with the cause of social justice early in Chughtai's career through the movement spearheaded by B. R. Ambedkar. See Ananya Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), 208–242.

93 When I asked Chughtai's grandson Ashish about his grandmother's religious practices, he told me, "She used to smoke and drink which was very amusing to me as a child. These Mullā types would come to our house and she would offer them alcohol and the poor chaps wouldn't know what to say." He continued, "When I was going off to school, she did tie a *ta'vīz* [amulet] around my arm, I was surprised. She always used to have a stand with a *tasbīḥ* and a statue of Mother Mary and an *mūrtī* [idol], so I've done the same." Ashish Sawhny, Interview #1, January 2, 2011.

94 Through interviews and in particular through her serialized autobiography, discussed later in this dissertation, Chughtai actively negotiated her own literary celebrity in a way which rendered her simultaneously contrarian and empathetic to her readers. On the idea of literary celebrity and its relationship to authorship, see Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

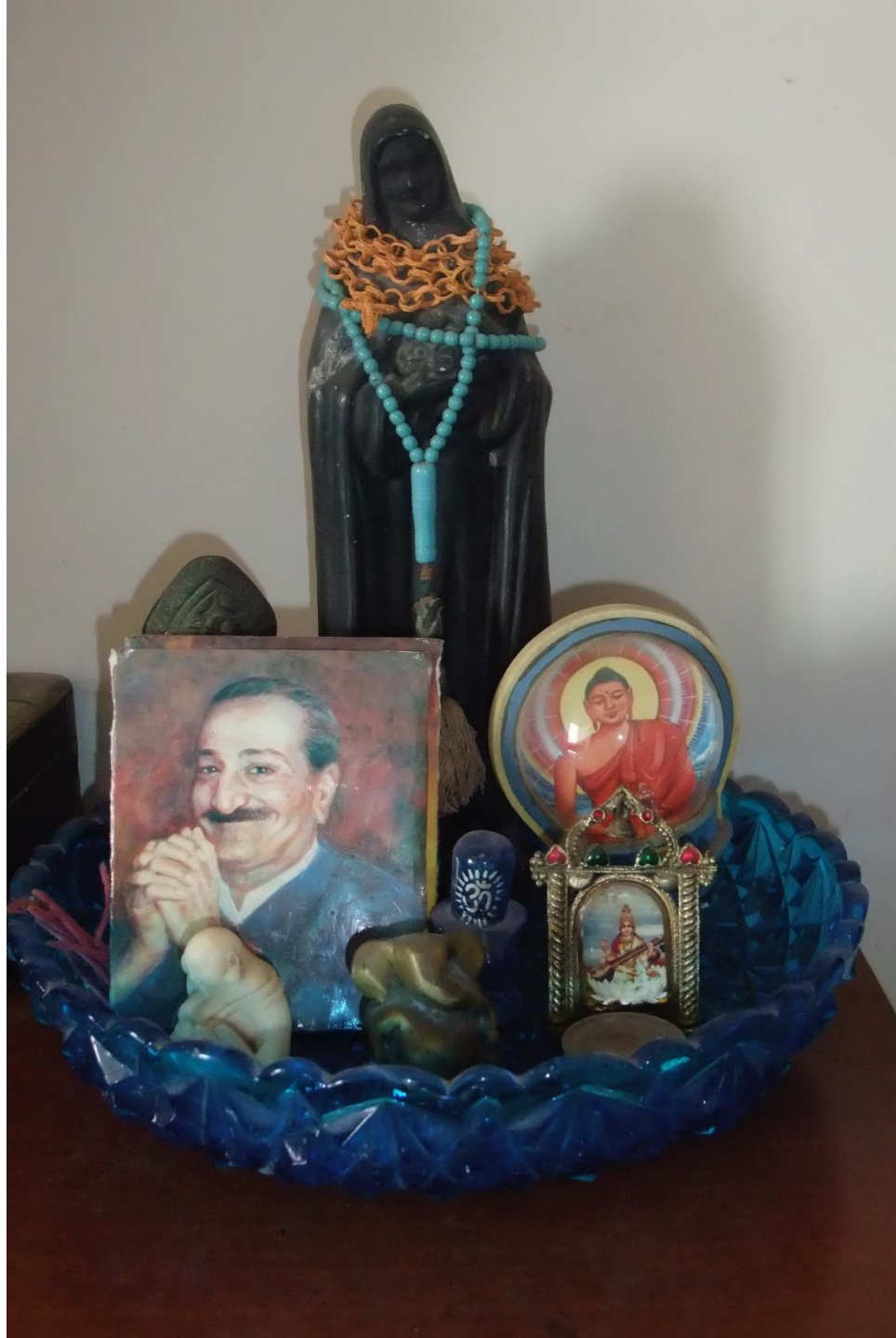


Figure 1.1:
Bedside altar in the private collection of her grandson Ashish Sawhny, reminiscent of the one
that belonged to his grandmother Ismat Chughtai

Like the protagonists of "Sacred Duty," Chughtai expressed a complex and eclectic identity in her personal practices as well. As a public figure, her religious beliefs were frequently the cause of speculation in the media. On several occasions Chughtai had expressed that she did not want to be buried after her death. For example, Ritu Menon wrote for the *Economic Times*, that Chughtai had told her: "I don't want to be buried when I die... Arre, what if my eyes fly open suddenly? Much better to be cremated."⁹⁵ Through her characteristic comedic style, Chughtai perhaps alludes to her own fears regarding the afterlife, particularly what many Muslims refer to as the punishments of the grave. The publication of these comments even during her lifetime would be expected to make her family's choice to cremate her after death an understandable one from the perspective of an individual living in a secular society.

Chughtai's family, acquaintances and the public had varied reactions to her cremation, which is generally understood in India as a Hindu ritual. In the days and weeks following her death, the press sensationalized the event by covering the story. In fact, a front-page article in the *Sunday Mid-Day* on October 27, 1991, discussed her cremation at length, with the title, "She chose to be cremated."⁹⁶ As the closest relative, her daughter Seema Sawhny would appear to be the best judge of her mother's wishes. The hesitation to accept the actual cremation was that cremations are associated with Hinduism and thus to be cremated was seen as a rejection of belonging to the Muslim community. The objections held by many Muslims were most

95 Ritu Menon, "'Sab Likh Chuki Hoon,'" *Economic Times (New Delhi)*, n.d.

96 The style of this article is very romanticized, for example: "On that beautiful Thursday night, when the moon was shining all over the Arabian Sea outside the Gateway of India, somewhere up there in the sky, Ismat Chughtai [sic] must have really chuckled. Sheer impish delight! Her ashes were being sprinkled into the sea by her close family from a smooth boat ride, much to the shock of her several friends and admirers. 'It was a lovely moonlit night and everything was so peaceful,' remarked her daughter Seema Sawhny.'" Draupadi Rohera, "She Chose to Be Cremated," *The Mid-Day (Bombay)*, October 27, 1991, 1.

succinctly summed up by the poet and fellow Progressive Writer Majrūḥ Sulṭānpūrī (1919–2000): “It was a very foolish last wish. What kind of secularism is this, to be cremated instead of buried, to break cultural values. There was neither a pooja nor a namaaz. I did not go for her cremation [...] I have never seen a secular Hindu asking to be buried. Ismat was not in her proper senses for the last year and therefore, I think, such wishes have no value.”⁹⁷ Note that he refers to her choice as a type of secularism gone too far. The “breaking of cultural values” is deemed unacceptable because it makes it difficult to categorize her. For Sultanpuri, secularism should abide by a fixed notion of religious community. Yet, for secular norms to truly be primary, one would not be bound by expectations of the community of one's birth. Similarly, in a letter to the editor of *Dawn*, Syed Ali Mehdi of Karachi writes:

myself and many of my way of thinking, were horror-stricken to learn that Ismat Chughtai, born and brought up in a conservative Muslim family, chose in her own wisdom, to be cremated instead of being buried in accordance with Islamic injunctions! There should be a limit to sacrifice one's faith and religion at the altar of paganism. Alas, what an ignoble lesson she has imparted to the Muslim posterity!⁹⁸

For these critics, religion goes beyond an understanding of a privatized system of beliefs; it is rather an absolute form of collective identity, something from which one cannot be allowed to escape. The author of this letter, as the voice of traditional Islam here, equates secularism with paganism. Ultimately, it was Chughtai's rejection of his vision of Islam that gave him discomfort, with her cremation as a mere symbol. The “ignoble lesson” is that one can choose to dispose of one's body as wished individually and that the individual trumps community identity and expectations. This identity inscribes itself on the body even unto death. By forgoing a Muslim burial, Chughtai committed a double transgression in appropriating the tradition of

97 Ibid.

98 Syed Ali Mehdi, “Ismat Chughtai,” *Dawn*, August 11, 1991.

another community, and this too without the performance of the customary Hindu rituals. For her critics, this final act transgressed even what were perceived to be the acceptable limits of secularism. Yet ultimately, for Chughtai, the right to exercise free choice without the constriction of communal disapprobation was paramount to her idea of self. Even in death, her body stood as a symbol of this ideal.

Speaking of the controversy regarding his grandmother's funeral, Ashish Sawhny recalled that Chughtai "did feel hurt by some people in the community and the things they said about her, which is why we were so offended when people suddenly, when she died, started saying 'no, she's ours and you have to bury her in our way.'"⁹⁹ Though Chughtai did identify as a Muslim, she also saw herself as part of a secular Indian public. Here Sawhny reflects on the belonging of an individual in life and death. What right does a community whose leaders rejected her during her life have to dictate what happens to her body after death? Making this choice provided on last message from Chughtai regarding the primacy of the individual and secular relationships between members of society.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have investigated the complex relationship between secularism and the South Asian context by placing Chughtai's work in conversation with Indo-Muslim literary traditions as well as theoretical works on secularism. I argue that in Chughtai's work, religious idiom was always at the service of the pursuit of humanistic social progress. Cosmopolitan projects were an essential element of the formation of the postcolonial Indian state. This storytelling of quotidian realities reflects her a unique perspective on prevailing political attitudes

⁹⁹ Sawhny, Interview #1.

about communalism and the nation leading up to Partition. As a supporter of the Indian National Congress, Chughtai took a stand regarding the integration of Muslims into the broader Indian fabric. She did not believe that Indian Muslims should constitute a different nation. At the time of Partition, Chughtai stayed in India while many of her friends and family migrated to Pakistan. Her answer to the “Muslim question” was to entrench herself firmly within secular ideals and norms.

Like many contemporary Indian intellectuals, Chughtai was steeped in a cosmopolitan worldview. Later in her life, Chughtai was sharply critical of the inconsistencies of the secular state as it concerned the practice of communal personal law. Chughtai was familiar both with the Persianate tradition of Islamicate humanism and with the Enlightenment and Marxist traditions of secular thought. As her bedside altar reminds us, characters are not bound forever in one religious tradition; rather, they participate in religious practices eclectically; they socialize with, befriend, hate, and fall in love with others. Notably, Chughtai borrowed freely from the idioms of the various religious traditions of India to advocate for a cosmopolitan social justice. Her life and work illuminate the possibility for secular Muslim thought in modern India, a category that has implications for the understanding of Islam and Muslim societies beyond the subcontinent as well.

Chapter Two

The Personal is Political: Economic and Sexual Justice in Modern India

On December 16, 2012, Jyoti Singh Pandey was raped by four men on a New Delhi bus. Protests took place in Delhi and across India critiquing the government's handling of the case. Protesters argued that perpetrators of sexual violence too often go unpunished, that the government provided too little security for women, and that such acts of violence were willfully ignored by the Indian public.¹ The reactions to Jyoti Singh Pandey's rape, and subsequent death, vividly illustrate contemporary discourses in India on the issue of sexual violence. Yet, these kinds of protest movements did not simply spring up in the last few years. Progressive organizations such as those behind the 2012-13 protests have an intellectual heritage that deserves closer scrutiny. Ismat Chughtai was one of the very first Indian writers to call attention to sexual injustice as a societal phenomenon, an issue that she linked to economic injustice more broadly, and as such, her work continues to have relevance today.

Among contemporary activists, Chughtai is often invoked as a forerunner of various progressive causes, especially the cause of sexual justice. As Shelley Walia's in an article for *The Hindu*:

In the wake of the global rape epidemic and violence against women, Ismat Chughtai's work becomes all the more pertinent. Taking hypocrisy and sexual

1 On contemporary Indian women's social movements, see the papers in Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Anne Waldrop, eds., *Women, Gender and Everyday Social Transformation in India* (Anthem Press, 2014). On the immediate reaction to the rape by Indian feminists, see Rukmini Sen, "The Need for an Everyday Culture of Protest," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 7, 2013, <http://www.epw.in/web-exclusives/need-everyday-culture-protest.html>. See also Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

oppression as integral to women's daily routine, Chughtai uses her fiction to create a disquiet that reverberates through her works. The brilliance of her writing and its social critique is motivated by an act of resistance to a violent world that calls for change.²

In Chughtai's formulation of social progress, sexual autonomy was paramount. This type of sexual expression was limited both by Islamic legalistic norms as well as the Indian legal system's interpretations of secularism, which maintained separate codes of family law based on religious community. In her work, Chughtai emphasizes the link between hierarchical economic injustice and limitations on autonomous sexual choice. Ultimately, I argue that through the social critique implicit in her fiction and non-fiction works, Chughtai created a form of social progress in which sexual and economic injustice were intimately bound, a quality that makes her a unique locus of inspiration for contemporary social justice movements.

In the last chapter, I argued that Chughtai's characters act in a world steeped in cosmopolitan religious idioms, but also squarely in the service of her secular ideals. In this respect, Chughtai was certainly not the only writer of her context to pursue secular ideals, but because of her long career and her enduring popularity among a South Asian readership, she is a productive site of inquiry into the possibility of an Indo-Muslim secular. In this chapter, I focus on the qualities that made her work stand out from others in her intellectual milieu, namely the synthesis of sexual and economic justice. Indeed, her focus on sexuality and individualism earned her the chastisement of her peers in the Progressive Writers' Movement. Yet unlike contemporary Modernist writers such as Miraji and N. M. Rashid, who wrote about sexuality under the slogan "art for art's sake," Chughtai remained committed to the cause of political action and social progress throughout her career.

2 Shelley Walia, "Literature as Subversion," *The Hindu*, September 6, 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/literature-as-subversion/article6386039.ece>.

Chughtai and the Indian Progressive Writers' Movement

Communism and progressive movements played a major role in Chughtai's intellectual development. Though she was not an economist, Chughtai did comment in her writings that she thought communism was the most ethical economic system. In discussing her early involvement with the Progressive Writers, she wrote:

I learned the ups and downs of class, and for the first time, I was aware that the enemy of my joys was not my *dādī* [paternal grandmother] or *nānī* [maternal grandmother] but the system of government. At that time I learned of communism in great detail and I was convinced that the peace and safety of the world and its happiness could only be achieved through a socialist system and there is still no crack in that belief.³

Indeed, it was through communism that Chughtai came to support the Indian National Congress because, "I had faith that when the country obtained freedom, Congress would impose communism because Gandhi was a leader of the common man. He would secure rights for *harījans* [untouchables]."⁴ Like many intellectuals of her generation in the late colonial period, Chughtai had grown up in the wake of the Russian Revolution, and was an ardent believer in the

3 *mujhe ṭabaqātī utār charḥā' o kā 'ilm huā. aur main ne pahilī bār jānā ki merī masarraton kī dushman merī dādī nānī nahīn yih nizām-e hukūmat hai. us zamāne mein mujhe kamyūnizm ke bāre mein tafṣīl se ma'lūmāt ḥāsil hū'ī aur mujhe yaqīn ho giyā ki duniyā mein amn-o amān aur khush-ḥālī ṣirf ishtirākī nizām ke zarī'a qā'im rah saktī hai aur us yaqīn mein abhī tak ko'ī darār nahīn parī. 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī, "Taraqqī pasand adab aur main," 'Aṣrī Āgahī 1, no. 1 (May 1979): 11.*

4 *mujhe yaqīn thā ki mulk āzād hogā tab kāngres kamyūnizm hī lāgū karegī. kyūnki gāndhī jī to 'ām insān ke rahnumā hai. vuh harījanon ko jīne kā ḥaqq dilā'enge. Chughtā'ī, Kāghazī Hai Pairahan, 222–223.*

potential of communism to bring about social and economic justice.⁵ Communism was seen to be the best antidote to colonialism.

In arguing that sexual and economic progress were intertwined in Chughtai's work, I refer to the term progress (*taraqqī*) as employed by members of the Progressive Writers' Movement (*taraqqī-pasand taḥrīk*), a social-realist literary movement active primarily between 1935 and 1953.⁶ Chughtai claimed that progressivism had been alive since "the world's first man cried out when surrounded by the curse" of "inequality" (*nā-barābarī*) and "injustice" (*nā-inṣāfī*).⁷ She also claimed this movement would include premodern authors such as Kabīr and Mīrābāi. The Indian Progressive Writers' Movement emerged in the 1930s, comprised of Indians based in the subcontinent as well as Indian students studying abroad. It was one of the most important developments in 20th-century Indian intellectual history before Independence. While Chughtai was a student at Aligarh Girls' School, authors Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Rashīd Jahān, and Maḥmuduzzafar published the short fiction collection *Angāre* (*Embers*).⁸ Notably, Sajjad Zaheer, Rashīd Jahān and Maḥmuduzzafar were involved with the Communist Party of

5 On the history of Marxism in South Asia, see Kris Manjapra's study of M. N. Roy, one of the leading Indian Marxists of the early twentieth century: Kris Manjapra, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

6 Mahmud, "Angāre and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association"; Coppola, "Urdu Poetry, 1935-1970"; Coppola, "The Angare Group"; Zaheer, *The Light*; Rakhshanda Jalil, *Liking Progress, Loving Change: A Literary History of the Progressive Writers' Movement in Urdu*, 2014; A'zamī, *Urdū men taraqqī pasand adabī taḥrīk*.

7 *jab duniyā ke pahile insān ne [...] la'nat se ghirā kar āh bhārī*. Chughtā'ī, "Taraqqī pasand adab aur main," 10.

8 The text of *Angāre* was reprinted in 1988 as Sajjād Zāhīr et al., *Angāre: ek jā'izah*, ed. Shabāna Maḥmūd (London: Kitābiyāt, 1988). Two English translations have recently appeared: Snehal Shingavi, trans., *Angaaray* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2014); Vibha Chauhan and Khalid Alvi, trans., *Angarey: 9 Stories and a Play* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2014).

India and Sajjād Zāhīr was Joint-Secretary of the All-India Congress Socialist Party at the time, eventually taking on the position of Secretary of the Communist Party of Pakistan.⁹

The publication of *Angāre* provoked a strong reaction across North India, especially by the ‘*ulamā*. In particular, it was the mixing of sexual and religious imagery that caused the most severe reaction. For example, the story “Nīnd Nahīn Ātī” (Can’t Sleep) by Sajjad Zaheer discusses God stroking his beard with desire and his story “Jannat kī Bashārat” (A Vision of Paradise) depicts a *maulavī* [religious teacher] dreaming of naked *houris* [heavenly nymphs] in paradise only to be found by his wife clutching his Qur’an on his prayer mat, having fallen asleep doing prayers on Laylat-ul-Qadr. In February of 1933, the Central Standing Committee of the All India Shia Conference condemned the text with this statement:

The Central Standing Committee...at this meeting strongly condemns the heart-rending and filthy pamphlet called Angarey compiled by Sajjad Zahir, Ahmed Ali, Rashid Jehan, Mahmudul Zafer which has wounded the feelings of the entire Muslim community by ridiculing God and his Prophet and which is extremely objectionable from the standpoints of both religion and morality. The committee further strongly urges upon the attention of the U.P. [United Provinces] Government that the book be at once proscribed.¹⁰

The ire that the book aroused led to its being banned in the United Provinces by the British government in March of 1933. The wounding of religious sentiments was a major concern in the late colonial period, and riots and murders often occurred based on such assumed injuries.

9 Waheed, “Radical Politics and the Urdu Literary World in the Era of South Asian Nationalisms c.1919 - 1952,” 171.

10 Girja Kumar, *The Book on Trial: Fundamentalism and Censorship in India* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997), 120–121. [cited in Snehal Shingavi, “Introduction,” in *Angaaray* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2014), viii.] See also Geeta Patel, *Lyrical Movements, Historical Hauntings: On Gender, Colonialism, and Desire in Miraji’s Urdu Poetry* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002), 90–100.

The publication of *Angāre* grabbed the attention of a number of young Indian writers. In 1934, the Progressive Writers' Association was formed in London, and in 1936, the first all-India meeting of the Progressive Writers' Association was held in Lucknow. In the same year, the Association's first manifesto in English was published in the *Left Review*.¹¹ Munshī Premchand¹² delivered the inaugural address at this conference and the writer Rabindranath Tagore¹³ sent a letter of support. These events are widely seen as the catalysts to the birth of the nationwide Progressive Writers' Movement. With a sharp critique of the romantic idealism that they felt characterized literature of the past two centuries, the Progressive Writers believed that writing was a tool that could be used to instigate social reform. Though the definition of what constituted progressive literature changed with time, in its early phase, progressivism is described as that which examines issues reasonably and critically, and enables a fundamental reorganization and transformation of the self.¹⁴ Though the Progressive Writers' Movement found adherents from authors writing in various regional languages, its most prominent writers wrote in Urdu.

11 This manifesto, the first of several revisions, was composed a year earlier in London in 1935. It was brought to India and widely circulated, being published in Premchand's literary journal *Hāms* in October of 1935.

12 Munshī Premchand (1880–1936) was a pioneering writer of novels and short stories who notably wrote both in Urdu and Hindi. Premchand was one of the earliest authors from South Asia to write realist literature. On the social context of Premchand, see Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (New Delhi : Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). More generally, on the life of Premchand, see the introduction to *Ibid*.

13 Bengali author Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was the best-known Indian author of his day, being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. While the literature on Tagore is vast, on Tagore's international connections, see Kris Manjapra, *Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals across Empire*, Harvard Historical Studies 183 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014).

14 Anand, "On the Progressive Writers' Movement (1939)," 20–21. On the categories of "progressivism" and "modernism" in Urdu literature, see Pue, *I Too Have Some Dreams*.

The work and influence of Rashīd Jahān had a great impact on Chughtai's development. She wrote one of her earliest articles in the Aligarh University school newspaper in support of Jahān. As a student, she attended the first Progressive Writers' Conference in 1936, along with several others who were still students at the time, but who would become major literary figures in the coming decade: Ali Sardar Jafri, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, and Shahid Latif, her future husband. Writing much later about Chughtai's association with the Progressive Writers' Movement, the author Qurratulain Hyder noted: "Ismat *apa*¹⁵ was very much in its vanguard. In their enthusiasm, the progressives sometimes went too far and thus created a strong opposition for themselves in the literary world. On the whole, they were dubbed as atheists and commies who were out to destroy all moral and social values. It was worse for Ismat Chughtai because she was a woman."¹⁶ Chughtai was a part of the movement from its early days and she came to be regarded as the most prominent woman writer of the organization.¹⁷

Inspired by *Angāre*, Chughtai attempted to publish essays about social issues relating to women's rights, but without success. Chughtai's submission of an essay entitled "Bachpan" (Childhood) to the women's journal *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* met with rebuke from the editor. Her brother, 'Azīm Beg Chughtā'ī, who by that time had already begun to publish works of fiction, advised her that she would be allowed to write more freely and powerfully about the issues that mattered to her through the medium of fiction than through non-fiction essays. 'Azīm Beg had

15 *Āpā*, Urdu for "big sister," is used here to designate a kind of intellectual kinship between Haidar and Ismat Chughtai.

16 Qurratulain Hyder, "A Touch of Sensation," *The Times of India*, November 3, 1991, 14.

17 Rashīd Jahān's contributions to the *Angāre* collection significantly link her to the Progressive writers. Yet, she published little after her 1936 collection of short stories entitled '*Aurat (Woman)*'. Her primary occupation was as a gynecologist and she died relatively early in 1952. On her career, see Rakhshanda Jalil, *A Rebel and Her Cause: The Life and Work of Rashid Jahan* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2014).

published several of his own stories in the literary journal *Sāqī* (Cupbearer), edited by Shāhid Aḥmad,¹⁸ and it was here that Chughtai published her first story, “Kāfir,” (Infidel) in 1938. The friendships and networks of patronage to which Chughtai was privy due to her brother’s literary connections certainly played a role in the start of her career.

In 1939, a year after Chughtai published her first story in *Sāqī*, she received her Bachelor’s degree in teaching and began a job at the Rajmahal School in Jodhpur. In the same year, she completed her first Urdu novella, entitled *Ẓiddī* (*Headstrong*), which was published as a book by *Sāqī*. In 1941, *Sāqī* Book Depot published the first collection of Chughtai’s short stories under the title *Kaliyān* (*Buds*). Yet her life was in the midst of a period of turmoil. In 1941, her brother ‘Azīm Beg, the family member to whom she was the closest, died in the city of Jaora, where he had been made Chief Justice of the court of the Nawab. In the same year, Chughtai left her job in Jodhpur to take a new job of Inspector of Schools in Bombay. She briefly stayed with her brother Jasīm Beg Chughtā’ī, an engineer for the Tata Corporation. Within six months of her arrival in the city, she married Shahid Latif on May 2, 1942. After a stint working on Maulavī ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq’s Urdu dictionary project for the Inhuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū (Society for the Promotion of Urdū) in Aurangabad,¹⁹ Latif had moved to nearby Bombay to work in the nascent Hindi cinema industry.

In Bombay, Chughtai came to meet many of the progressive Urdu writers who had migrated from North India and Punjab. Authors Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Mohsin Abdullah²⁰

18 Shāhid Aḥmad was the grandson of Nazīr Aḥmad, author of *Mirāt al-‘Arūs*, which is discussed in the next chapter.

19 On Maulavī ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq, see Kavita Saraswathi Datla, *The Language of Secular Islam: Urdu Nationalism and Colonial India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013)..

20 Mohsin Abdullah (Muḥsin ‘Abdullāh) was the son of Shaikh ‘Abdullāh, the founder of Aligarh Girls’ School, and the younger brother of Rashīd Jahān.

were witnesses to her marriage. Soon after, the couple became acquainted with Ali Sardar Jafri, editor of *Qaumī Jung* (People's Newspaper), the Urdu newspaper of the Communist Party of India, and Saadat Hasan Manto,²¹ who would be tried with Chughtai for obscenity in 1946. During the 1940s, Bombay had become an intellectual hotbed as writers and artists flocked to the city.²²

Despite the fact that Chughtai worked extensively with her husband Shahid Latif, she continued to emphasize her individual autonomy in her writing and interviews. Chughtai depicted her decision to get married as one of necessity. Since she had fallen out with her brother Jasīm Beg and her parents over her cancelled betrothal to her cousin Dr. Aṭhar Ḥusain Uṣmānī (“Jugnū”), Chughtai claimed that she needed her own place to live in Bombay. In a 1983 interview in the journal *Manushi*, Chughtai was asked to discuss her marriage to Shahid Latif and how she had been able to get out of an engagement to her cousin. She answered,

Once I was earning, they could not impose anything on me. I met Shahid when I was staying at my brother's house in Bombay. Shahid proposed marriage. At that time, I was inspector of schools for the whole Bombay area, but I could not find a place to stay. No one was willing to rent a house to an unmarried woman. I was not willing to spend my life in a hostel so I thought I would have to marry somebody. Here was Shahid pursuing me. Why not marry him? [...] In fact, I told Shahid that I was willing to live with him without marriage. He said: ‘No, you will leave me and run away.’ I said: ‘why should I run away? I need somebody, some friend, some man. It doesn't have to be a husband.’ But since he insisted on marriage, I agreed.²³

Chughtai portrayed her relationship with Shahid Latif as a marriage of convenience, though the

21 Years later, Ismat Chughtai would write the essay “Merā Dost, Merā Dushman” (My Friend, My Enemy) on her relationship with Manto. Ayesha Jalal has written on the relationship between the two authors, Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*, 114–117.

22 On the Bombay of this period, see Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

23 Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, “An Irrepressible Spirit: An Interview with Ismat Chughtai,” *Manushi* 19 (1983): 5.

two shared interests in politics, literature, and film. Yet the rather dry take on her courtship and marriage stands in contrast to the portraits they had taken to share with their family a few months after their marriage (figures 2.1 and 2.2). Here, the two beam like archetypal newlyweds. It should, however, be taken into account that these portraits remain separate images—only when placed side-by-side is the object of their gaze understood by the viewer. No formal wedding photos remain from Chughtai and Latif's ceremony. Though Chughtai's above critique is most clearly one about the institution of marriage, it also extends to the concept of romantic love itself. Nowhere in her writings or interviews does she mention feeling love for her husband; rather she describes their partnership.

The attitude Chughtai expressed towards her own husband in her interviews and autobiographical writing is a far cry from the romanticism of the classical Urdu literary tradition toward the beloved. Practicality and attending to her own needs rather than romantic love are paramount in her account of her marriage. This disavowal of romantic love was in line with her advocacy of absolute equality between the sexes and a response to familial norms that would make a husband the center of a women's life. Such an attitude is found throughout Chughtai's writing.

It was not only in her own life that Chughtai ridiculed ideas of romantic love. In a piece reporting on the Progressive Writers' Conference of 1949, Chughtai mocked the Progressive poet Majrūh for his betrothal in an arranged marriage to a woman from the village, which she termed “a regressive (*raj'at-pasand*) act.”²⁴ Particularly negative is the idealization of supposedly innocent and uneducated village girls among the male writers of her circle. Rather than romanticized and idealized relationships, Chughtai wrote about what she saw as the realistic

24 Chughtā'ī, “Bamba'ī se Bhopāl tak.”



Figure 2.1:
Shahid Latif, September 2, 1942, Sawhny Collection.



Figure 2.2:
Ismat Chughtai, “Lovely Lady and Shamīm’s “Ghost” (her brother’s nickname for her)
September 2, 1942.

needs of human beings, prominent among them economic and sexual needs. Though the Progressive Writers' Movement was premised on presenting realities and social disparities, it was her integration of sexual justice with a woman's needs that made her a controversial figure.

The Obscenity of Everyday Life: Liḥāf and the Marriage of Sex and Power

Controversy came to a head when she published "Liḥāf" (The Quilt), the story for which she is now most famous. "Liḥāf" was published in 1942 in the Lahore-based literary journal *Adab-e Laṭīf*, under the supervision of the poet Faiz Aḥmad Faiz (1911-1984). In the same year, several other Progressive writers, indeed some of the most prominent Urdu writers of the twentieth century, had published stories in the journal, including Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Krishan Chander, Rashīd Jahān, Rajinder Singh Bedi, and Manto (Figure 2.3). The following year, the story was included in the second collection of Chughtai's short stories published in Delhi by Shāhid Aḥmad under the title *Choṭeṇ* (*Wounds*) (Figure 2.4).

"Liḥāf" is narrated by a young girl who is sent by her mother to stay with a family friend while her mother is traveling. While there, she comes to learn about the relationship between the mistress of the household, Begam Jān, and her servant and masseuse Rubbū. Begam Jān is in a loveless marriage in which her husband, the Nawāb Šāhib,²⁵ shows more interest in the young male Qur'ān students whom he hosts at his estate than in his wife. Begam Jān tries everything to attract his attention to no avail; she sinks into loneliness and depression. Her well-being improves drastically through an intimate relationship with her maid Rubbū. The child narrator sleeps in the same room as Begam Jān and regularly witnesses commotion under the swaying

25 A title for a Muslim noble or ruler of a princely state.

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| سائنس نامہ | الف | فہرس | مآخذ نامہ |
| ادب لطیف | | | |
| ۱۹۴۲ء | | | |
| نگار | | | |
| فیض مسدوق | | | |
| چندی برکت علی | | | |
| چندی نیر احمد | | | |
| مکتبہ | | | |
| آزاد لاہور | | | |

Figure 2.3:
Title Page from *Adab-e Latif, Sālnāma* 1942 and its table of contents.

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| ۹۱ | چوہین |
| | لیہاف |
| | چوہین |
| | عصمتیائی |
| | ساقی محمد علی |
| | مطہ دلی پرنٹنگ ورکس |
| | باراٹل |

Figure 2.4:
Choṭen, published in 1943 by Sāqī Book Depot and the first page of the story *Lihāf*.

quilt. The narrator herself has disturbing and charged encounters with Begam Jān and at the end of the story sees something under the quilt that is not revealed to the reader.

Chughtai was not the only Urdu writer of her generation to write about same-sex desire. Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askarī wrote two stories centering on same sex desire in the early 1940s: “Phislan” (Slipperiness, published in *Nayā Adab*, 1941) and “Chā’ī kī Piyālī” (A Cup of Tea, published in *Adabī Duniyā*, 1942). In “Phislan,” Jamāl’s servant Nazrū provides him with sexually explicit stories and increasingly intimate massages.²⁶ In “Chā’ī kī Piyālī,” Dolly daydreams about her intimate encounters with her friend Bernice.²⁷ However, as I will discuss below, the issue was not so much Chughtai’s addressing the topic of same-sex desire or even desire more broadly, but Chughtai’s doing so while being identified as a woman from a respectable family that was deemed obscene.

The story begins in the intimacy of the narrator’s bed. She explains that the swaying elephantine shadows her winter quilt casts on the wall remind her of bygone days. At the end of the frame, the reader is transported to those earlier days. Chughtai utilized a variety of strategies to question gender norms in “Liḥāf.” At the outset of the story, the narrator recalls her gender-bending youth: “This is a tale from the days when I used to spend my time fighting with my brothers day and night. Sometimes I would ask myself why I was so aggressive. At the same age when my other sisters were gathering admirers, I was busy fighting with every boy or girl that I met.”²⁸ She narrates that her non-compliance with gender norms through the practice of fighting,

26 Discussed in Farooqi, *Urdu Literary Culture: Vernacular Modernity in the Writing of Muhammad Hasan Askari*.

27 For an extended discussion of these stories see Ibid., 82–92.

28 *jab kā zikr hai jab main chhoṭī sī thī aur din bhar bhā’iyon aur un ke doston ke sāth mār kaṭā’ī meṅ guzār diyā kartī thī. kabhī kabhī mujhe khayāl ātā ki main kambakht itnī larākā kyūn hūn. us ‘umr meṅ jabki merī aur bahineṅ ‘āshiq jam’ kar rahī thī main*

as compared to her sisters' gathering of admirers, is significant because "this was the reason that when Amma was going to Agra, she left me with her close friend for the whole week."²⁹ The reason her mother felt comfortable leaving her with this friend was because there were no children around and there would be no one with whom she could get into fights. It is while providing background on her mother's friend that the reader is introduced to Begam Jān whose relationship with the housemaid Rubbū is the best-known part of the story. A household with no children is markedly different from the normative Indian household at the time, thus this simple detail alerts the reader that there is something notable about Begam Jān's family life.

Begam Jān was from a poor family, but her parents had married her to a Nawāb (nobleman) despite his old age because he was thought to be pious. For example, no prostitutes or courtesans were seen at his manor and he had performed the Ḥajj pilgrimage and sent his sisters on Ḥajj as well. Drawing on literary predecessors for whom outward piety was regarded as insincere, in Chughtai's literary universe, this external religiosity is an immediate sign of a suspicious character.

The uncanny nature of this household is repeatedly emphasized. The reader's suspicions regarding the Nawāb are further stoked when the narrator states: "he had an exceedingly strange hobby" (*unhen ek nihāyat 'ajīb-o gharīb shauq thā*).³⁰ Unlike other noblemen who raised pigeons or engaged in cockfighting, the Nawāb's residence was home to students, who are described in a sensual manner: "young, fair-skinned, narrow-waisted boys" (*naujavān gore patlī-*

apne parā'e har larke aur larkī se jūtam paizār men mashghūl thī. 'Iṣmat Chughṭā'ī, *Choṭen* (Delhi: Sāqī Buk Ḍipo, 1942), 91.

29 *yihī vajh thī ki ammān jab āgra jāne legīn to hafta bhar ke li'e mujhe apnī ek munh-bolī bahin ke pās chhoṛ ga'īn.* Ibid.

30 Ibid., 92.

kamaron ke larke)³¹ whose expenses were paid for by the Nawāb himself. This juxtaposition of the Nawāb's seemingly pious lack of interest in women and his "strange" hobby of supporting young male students points towards the Nawāb's pedophilic desires.

As others, including literary scholar Mehr Farooqi, have noted, the story, in spite of its reputation, is not a celebration of same-sex love. The Nawāb's interest in young boys is sinister rather than laudatory. Farooqi goes so far as to claim that "Liḥāf" is a "homophobic" story.³² Conversely, I argue that this strange space is where Chughtai integrates questions of economic disparity and unjust power dynamics with an exploration of human sexuality. It is not the homosexual undertones to the Nawāb's interest in his young students; rather it is the financial power he wields over them and his wife that makes this situation disturbing. The short story form chosen by Chughtai to tell this and indeed most of her stories is particularly effective in conveying the fragmented take on the lives of her characters. As the literary critic Georg Lukács argued, the short story is "the narrative form which pin-points the strangeness and ambiguity of life."³³ Despite this, contemporary critics of the story ignored these accounts of sexual exploitation and instead focused solely on the relationship between Begam Jān and Rubbū.

When the unfortunate Begam Jān married into this household, the narrator recounts that the Nawāb placed her "in the house and, along with all the furniture and personal items, forgot about her."³⁴ She suffered a great deal due to his disinterest in her existence and, it is assumed,

31 Ibid.

32 Farooqi, *Urdu Literary Culture: Vernacular Modernity in the Writing of Muhammad Hasan Askari*, 87.

33 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: The Merlin Press, 1971), 50.

34 *magar begam jān se shādī kar ke to vuh unheñ kull sāz-o sāmān ke sāth hī ghar meñ rakh kar bhūl ga'e*. Chughtā'ī, *Choṭeñ*, 92.

the neglect of her sexual needs. Rubbū “saved her just as she was sinking lower and lower.”³⁵

The key to this saving, which brought the color and life back into Begam Jān’s body, was massage by the Rubbū using a “strange and queer oil” (*‘ajīb-o gharīb tel*).³⁶ Again, the text emphasizes the uncanny nature of the substance that rejuvenates Begam Jān. The reason for these massage treatments was that “Begam Jān had an incurable itch” (*begam jān ko khujālī kā marṛ thā*).³⁷ Rubbū is constantly at Begam Jān’s side, having no other work in the household but attending to Begam Jān’s massage. At night the narrator sees the quilt on Begam Jān’s bed moving around like an elephant. When she cries out that she is scared, Begam Jān tells her to recite a verse from the Qur’an and go back to sleep. When that doesn’t work, the narrator asks if there might be a thief in the room. To this she hears Rubbū’s voice reply, “What thief?” That Rubbū’s voice emerges from under Begam Jān’s quilt so shocks the narrator that she hides herself in her covers and goes back to sleep. The next day, the narrator forgets all about the nocturnal happenings.

Rather than the nighttime visions of a swaying quilt, the most troubling encounter of the story occurs when Rubbū is away. Wanting to help Begam Jān feel better during Rubbū’s absence, the child narrator offers to scratch Begam Jān in her place. Begam Jān assents, telling the narrator: “scratch harder. Untie my trouser drawstring.”³⁸ Begam Jān’s reaction to this scratching by the narrator is voiced by sounds of pleasure: “‘yes—wow, oh, wow—yes—yes—.’”

35 *nīche girte girte sambhāliyā*. Ibid., 93.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 94.

38 *ṣarā zor se khujā’o—band khol do*. Ibid.

In her intoxication, Begam Jān started taking deep breaths and exhibiting relaxation.”³⁹ The narrator realizes that Begam Jān could very well scratch these spots of her body herself, but feels a sense of pride in doing it for her.

In this encounter the reader witnesses a disparity in power and understanding between Begam Jān and the child narrator. Begam Jān keeps the narrator occupied in conversation and asks her what she wants from the market, suggesting a doll that opens and closes her eyes. Begam Jān also offers to get new clothes made for her. In the midst of this distracting conversation, the narrator relates, “my hand went from here to there. Amid the conversation I didn’t even realize it. Begam Jān was lying completely still. Oh! I quickly pulled away my hand.”⁴⁰ The reader is not told where her hand had landed, but it was certainly somewhere it should not have been. Begam Jān smiles mischievously and gently chastises narrator, calling her to lie on her bed. The narrator squirms as Begam Jān counts the narrator’s ribs and comments on the tightness and thinness of her sweater. Though she does not protest very vocally, the narrator grows terrified of Begam Jān after this encounter, avoiding her at all costs. The references to buying her items from the market highlights the economic power Begam Jān holds over all of those in her daily life and Begam Jān’s use of the child for her sexual satisfaction without consent or understanding is the most powerful way the story exposes the potential for abuses of trust and power within the traditional household structure.

The narrator insists on going home when, on another occasion, Begam Jān changes clothes in front of her. Once again, Begam Jān tries to ply her with promises of taking her to the

39 “*hāñ—vāh bha ’ī vāh—hā—hā—*” *vuh surūr meñ ṭhandī ṭhandī sānsen le kar iṭmīnān zāhir karne lagen*. Ibid., 98.

40 *hāth na jāne kahān se kahān pahunchā. bātoñ bātoñ meñ mujhe ma ’lūm bhī na hogā. begam jān to chat leṭī thīñ ... are! maiñ ne jaldī se hāth khīnch liyā*. Ibid., 99.

bazaar and reminds her that her brothers would beat her when she returned home. Rubbū, who has now returned, dissuades Begam Jān from her pursuit of the narrator's company, saying: "Raw mangoes are sour, Begam Jān."⁴¹ That night again, of the sexual acts between Begam Jān and Rubbū are described through particular sounds. The narrator relates, "*chapaṛ, chapaṛ*—I heard sounds of someone eating, as if someone was indulging in a delicious chutney."⁴² Her observation occurs in the darkness of night while she is supposed to be sleeping on a cot near Begam Jān's bed. She cannot see what is happening but she describes the experience through what she hears. This use of hearing as vehicle for experience highlights the narrator's innocence. While the sound *chapaṛ* is used onomatopoeically—seemingly innocently—by the narrator, the near homophone *chapaṛ* and its derivative *chapaṛ-bāzī* are used in colloquial North Indian Urdu to refer to female homosexual sex acts. Platts' Urdu dictionary defines *chapaṛ* as "Congressus libidinosus duarum mulierum" (the sexual act of two women).⁴³ Likewise, the Urdu dictionary of words of popular usage, the *Mirāt-e Munīr*, defines *chapaṛī* as "the practice of lesbian (*musāḥiqat-peshā*) women to rub their vulvas against one another."⁴⁴ It is thus quite possible that Chughtai intended through her word choice to allude to an act without naming it.

41 *kachī amiyañ khaṭī hotī haiñ begam jān*. Ibid., 102.

42 *chapaṛ chapaṛ kuch khāne kī āvāzeñ ā rahī thīñ jaise ko'ī mazedār chaṭnī chakh rahā ho*. Ibid.

43 John T. Platts, *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (London: Crosby Lockwood and Son, 1899), 421.

44 "*zanān-e musāḥiqat-peshā kā mashghūla ba-ham farj par farj malne kā*" Muḥammad Munīr Lakḥnavī, *Mirāt-e Munīr, ya 'nī Munīr al-lughāt*. (Kanpur: Maṭba'-e Majīdī, 1930). On the history of the category *musāḥiqat*, see the important articles by Sahar Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 2 (2009): 215–36; Fedwa Malti Douglas, "Tribadism/lesbianism and the Sexualized Body in Medieval Arabo-Islamic Narrative," in *Same Sex Love and Desire among Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Francesca Canadé Sautman and Sheingorn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 123–41.

The story ends with a corner of the quilt being lifted and the narrator catching a glimpse of what was happening under it. At this point there are two extant versions of the ending. Farooqi describes the original version by writing: “The infamous story concludes with the most hackneyed, self-righteous sentence ever written by a serious author, ‘What I saw when the quilt was lifted I will not tell anyone, even if they give me a *Lakh* of rupees.’” Though it is not my interest to make claims about the literary merit of this sentence, it came to pass that after attracting criticism for this final line by the likes of authors such as Manto, it was removed from all later publications and the story simply ends with the narrator hiding herself in the bed after seeing whatever it is she saw under Begam Jān’s quilt. In either case, the narrator refuses to name what she saw, maintaining the suspect atmosphere of the story, and keeping the implicit act under the quilt.

Before and After the Quilt

“Liḥāf” is often cast as shocking because of what is considered to be the homoerotic elements of the story. However, writing about sexuality has a long history in Persianate literature. Throughout the corpus of Classical Persian poetry, the praise of a youthful male beloved by an older male lover (*amrad-parastī*) is an almost ubiquitous topos. Canonical lovers, like Sultān Maḥmūd of Ghazna (970–1030 CE) and his Georgian slave, Ayāz served as models to which poets could compare their love objects of affection. Likewise, among mystical poets, the soul’s longing for the Divine was frequently likened to a woman pining for her male beloved.⁴⁵ In bawdy verse (*hazl*), obscenity was used by poets to comic effect. The poet Sa’dī

45 On the feminine imagery of mystical poets, see Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York: Continuum, 1997). In the Ismā’īlī devotional literature of South Asia, the soul awaiting union with God is depicted as a woman

(1210-1291 CE), whose *Gulistān* served a foundational moral text used in primary schools for nearly seven centuries composed a well-known collection of bawdy writings (*hazliyyāt*).⁴⁶

Tolerance for the obscene during the late Mughal period gave rise to such poets as Mīr Muḥammad Ja‘far “Zaṭallī” (“Driveler,” 1658–1713 CE), who composed explicit verse in Persian on themes such as sexual anatomy, while the Urdu-language poet Mīr Bāqir ‘Alī “Chirkīn” (“Filthy,” 1797–1832 CE), specialized in writing poetry about the act of excretion. Other male poets of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, particularly those attached to the court of the Nawāb of Lucknow, engaged in literary cross-dressing, penning poems termed *rēkhtī*. These poems were narrated by a female subject speaking in idiomatic “women’s language” (*begamātī zabān*). As a genre, *rēkhtī* poems described aspects of women’s life as imagined by male authors, frequently depicting intimate and sometimes sexual relations with other women.⁴⁷

Despite disapproval by legal authorities, homosexual acts were rarely prosecuted in Mughal India.⁴⁸ This attitude toward same-sex love, however, was not shared by the British authorities, for whom sodomy had been made a capital offense in 1826. In 1860, shortly after the exile of the last Mughal Emperor Bahādur Shāh Z̤afar, Section 377 was added to the Indian Penal Code, rendering “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” punishable by life

awaiting marriage (see Ali Asani, “Bridal Symbolism in the Gināns,” in *Ecstasy and Enlightenment: The Ismaili Devotional Literature of South Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 54–70.)

- 46 On the genre of *hazl* in Persian literature, see Paul Sprachman, ed., *Suppressed Persian: An Anthology of Forbidden Literature*, Bibliotheca Iranica, no. 2 (Costa Mesa, Calif: Mazda Publishers, 1995).
- 47 Petievich, “Doganas and Zanakhis.”
- 48 Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, eds., *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, 1st ed (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 113.

imprisonment.⁴⁹ Apart from a four-year period between 2009–2013 in which this section was deemed unconstitutional, a decision ultimately overturned by the Indian Supreme Court, Section 377 has remained in effect since its inception.

In order to eliminate valorization of what was seen as a crime against nature, Colonial officials criticized the “vulgarity” of the poetic tradition, and indirectly encouraged a culture of self-critique to arise among the literary figures of the post-1857 period. Prominent among these was the poet Ḥālī, who critiqued the Persianate culture of his predecessors as effete and corrupt degradations of the earlier and “purer” Arab Islam. In his *Muṣaddas*, he writes, “the filthy archives of poetry and odes / more foul than a cesspool in its putridity, by which the earth is convulsed as if by an earthquake / and makes the angels blush in heaven, such is the place of our literature among other branches of learning / by which learning and faith are quite devastated”, alluding to a ḥadīth of the Prophet Muḥammad that the act of sodomy causes God’s throne to shake.⁵⁰ Ḥālī advocated a radical ethical cleansing of poetry in which the lyricist only speaks of love stripped of sensuality.⁵¹ While Ḥālī’s pronouncement of course did not mean that Urdu

49 On the origin and history of Section 377, see Suparna Bhaskaran, “The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code,” in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15–29.

50 Trans. Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed, *Hali’s Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 193. Cited in Scott Kugle, “Sultan Mahmud’s Makeover: Colonial Homophobia and the Persian-Urdu Literary Tradition,” in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2002), 39.

51 Kugle, “Sultan Mahmud’s Makeover,” 40.

authors abandoned the classical poetic tropes altogether, a generation later, Muḥammad Iqbāl could write that the time in which Ayāz's curls could excite Maḥmūd's desire was over.⁵²

There are a number of reasons why Chughtai was singled out for censure whereas these older forms of expression of what can be read as alternative sexualities were not. One possibility is that as a writer identified as a woman, it was particularly offensive to social sensibilities for Chughtai to approach such topics. It was one thing for men to discuss earthly love, and in the case of *rekhtī*, even take on the perspective of a woman, and yet it was another thing entirely for a woman from a *sharīf* background to write about sexuality and alternative sexuality at that. Another possibility is that the form of Chughtai's writing itself attracted censure. The literary form of the short story, particularly the realist short story, does not have the same generic conceits as classical Urdu poetry, and the claim of realist authors to bring the private into the public can be seen as threatening the social order.

Chughtai indicated in her writing and interviews that sexual and affective relationships between women were a common occurrence in her social circles. She claimed that: "When I wrote this story I lived with my brother. I wrote the story at night and in the morning I read it out to my brother's wife. She didn't say that it was a dirty story but she recognized who it was about."⁵³ In addition to this anecdote that provides context for her writing of "Liḥāf," there are numerous examples in her autobiographical essays of romantic relationships between women,

52 *na vuh 'ishq meṇ raheṇ garmiyān, na vuh ḥusn meṇ raheṇ shokhiyān / na vuh ghaznavī meṇ taṛap rahī, na vuh kham hai zulf-e ayāz meṇ.* Muḥammad Iqbāl, *Bāṅg-e darā: majmū'a-ye kalām-e Urdū* (Lāhaur: Jāved Iqbāl, 1945), 321. Translated as "No more enflaming in that passion, no more enticement in that beauty / Not in the Ghaznavi's outrageous desires nor in the curls of Ayaz's locks" in Kugle, "Sultan Mahmud's Makeover," 42.

53 *jab main ne yih kahānī likhī to main apnī bhā'ī ke sāth rahtī thī. rāt ko main ne kahānī likhī, ṣubḥ main ne apnī bhāvaj ko sunā'ī. unhoṇ ne to yih nahīn kahā ki yih gandī kahānī hai magar pahchān ga'īn ki kis kī kahānī hai.* Chughtā'ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 40.

most often schoolgirls. Chughtai posited a social milieu in which physical or sexual acts between women were commonplace. In other words, it was not as if she were advocating for obscene behaviors or actions; rather, she was simply bringing a particular case to light in order to talk more broadly about sexual and economic injustice. This claim of innocence from the charge of obscenity is one that is carried through her responses regarding the story “Liḥāf.”

Chughtai made clear that some readers of “Liḥāf” tried to punish her for her writing. Its notoriety spread very quickly. In critical essays, authors like Manto praised the work. It was even translated into English by fellow Progressive Writer Khwaja Ahmad Abbas in 1944 for the Bombay magazine *The Sound*.⁵⁴ The story attracted considerable opposition, and Chughtai writes that she began to receive hate mail—“The tone of these letters was so terrifying that I started sweating.”⁵⁵ She further described the intensity of this reaction, writing: “Then began a line of filthy letters. If such unique, convoluted and powerful obscenities were uttered before a corpse, it would get up and run away. They targeted not only me, but my whole family, Shahid and my two-month-old child.”⁵⁶ Similar to the threats of bodily harm and familial repercussions aimed at contemporary women’s activists and bloggers, Chughtai received threats in the form of letters, the anonymous medium of her time. What her critics took issue with was the graphic

54 *The Sound* was a Bombay-based literary and film magazine edited by journalist Zubair Babar Quraishī, alias Zabak. An advertisement for the magazine, which appears in the backmatter to K. A. Abbas’s 1944 *One Did Not Come Back*, claimed that the magazine had more circulation than any two other Bombay magazines put together. Unfortunately, while later volumes from 1947 onward are available, I have not been able to locate an extant copy of the 1944 volume of *The Sound*, and Abbas’s translation was not reprinted elsewhere.

55 *in khatṭon ka lahija itnā bhayānak tha ki pahle to mere pasīne chhūṭ ga’e. Chughtā’ī, Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 29.

56 *aur phir muḡhallaṣāt se bhare khatṭon kā tāntā lag gayā. aisī anokhī pīchdār bhārī bhar kam gāliyān ki murda ke sāmne bak dī jā’eṅ to uṭh kar bhāg jā’e mujhe hī nahīn mere pūre khāndān ko shāhid ko aur merī do mehine ki bachchī ko. Ibid.*, 40.

representation of female sexuality by a woman from a *sharīf* background because it threatened the social order.

Critique of “Liḥāf” was not limited to the general public but extended to works of literary criticism as well. Writing in 1945, the Urdu novelist and critic ‘Azīz Aḥmad made many disparaging remarks on what he termed Chughtai’s *jins-parastī* (sex-worship).⁵⁷ In his estimation, “her disposition is more regressive [*raj ‘at-pasand*, often translated as “reactionary”] and morbid than Saadat Hasan Manto.”⁵⁸ Aḥmad does not deem her writing progressive, because instead of representing the lives of women, as she should, she instead indulges in her individualistic obsession with sex. He wrote, “in the whole world she either sees herself, or she sees such things which give the most import to deviant, misguided, and abnormal sex.”⁵⁹ According to Aḥmad, she is especially egregious in missing out on one particularly essential part of being a woman: “she has forgotten that in the life of a woman one major reality is that of being a mother.”⁶⁰ In this criticism, we see that Aḥmad believed that Chughtai should be writing about the realities of women, but she was doing so improperly. His critique is a clear example of a male writer trying to put a woman in her assumed-to-be “rightful place.” The criticism would never be made of a male writer that by neglecting to write about fatherhood his work was

57 ‘Azīz Aḥmad (1914–1978), who wrote a number of novels and short stories during his early career, taught at Osmania University in Hyderabad before emigrating to Pakistan, the UK, and Canada. Ironically, sexuality was a major focus of his writing. See Pue, *I Too Have Some Dreams*, 38–39.

58 *un kā ruḥḥān sa ‘ādat ḥasan manṭo se bhī ziyāda raj ‘at-pasand aur marīzāna hai*. ‘Azīz Aḥmad, *Taraqī pasand adab* (Delhi: Chaman Book Depot, 1945), 126.

59 *vuh sārī duniyā meṇ apne āp hī ko dekhtī haiṇ yā sārī duniyā meṇ aisī chīzeṇ unheṇ naẓar ātī haiṇ jin kī sab se baṛī qadar jins kī be-rāḥ-ravī, gumrāhī, gḥalaṭ-ravī hai*. Ibid.

60 *aur vuh yih bhūl ga ’īṇ ki ‘aurat kī zindagī kī ek baṛī ḥaqīqat us kā māṇ honā bhī hai*. Ibid., 127.

inherently lacking. Ultimately, Aḥmad felt entitled to psychoanalyze Chughtai,⁶¹ writing: “at the base of Chughtai’s sex-worship is some conscious or unconscious family secret.”⁶² He condescendingly concludes that if she is put limits on her sex-worship and explored other parts of life she would “be able to make a place for herself in Urdu literature.”⁶³ It is apparent, however, that Chughtai was able to make her place in Urdu literature without the approval of critics like Aḥmad.⁶⁴

Critics did try their best to censure her and censor her work. In 1942, she was charged with publishing obscenity in “Liḥāf.” Anxieties surrounding the impending obscenity trial of Chughtai and Manto resulted in distress within the Progressive Writers’ Association. Already since the late 1930s, the meetings of the Progressive Writers’ Association served not only to discuss aspects of Progressivism but to discipline members who were accused of reactionary (*raj’at-pasand*) writing. The use of obscene (*fuḥsh*) language was a sensitive topic among Progressive authors. By the time of Chughtai and Manto’s obscenity trial, the question of whether obscenity had any place in Progressive literature was a hotly debated issue. At the 1945 All-India Progressive Writers’ Association conference in Hyderabad, Dr. ‘Abdul ‘Alīm

61 Psychoanalytic analysis (*naḥsiyātī tanqīd*) was at the time coming into vogue in Urdu literary criticism. See Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Ḥasan Rīzvī, *Urdū tanqīd men naḥsiyātī ‘anāṣir* (Lucknow: Idāra-e Furoḡ-e Urdū, 1968).

62 ‘*ismat kī jins-parastī kī tah men ko ‘ī shu ‘ūrī yā lā shu ‘ūrī khāndānī bhed hai*. Aḥmad, *Taraqqī pasand adab*, 127.

63 *urdū adab men jagah paidā kar sakengī*. Ibid.

64 Obscene writing among the Progressives also came under fire from ‘Alīgarh critic Rashīd Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī, those authors who presented sex as a healthy part of life, such as Qāzī ‘Abd al-Ḡhaffār and Faiz, were deemed to make a contribution to literature. On the other hand, Ṣiddīqī argued that one could not make a positive contribution to literature by dwelling on sex in and of itself, naming Maṇṭo and Mīrājī as examples. A‘ẓamī, *Urdū men taraqqī pasand adabī taḥrīk*, 85.

introduced a resolution against the use of obscene language. According to the resolution, “The trend of obscenity which is increasing has nothing to do with the perspective of Progressive Movement and Progressive literature. Progressive writers are opposed to obscenity and understand that it is unhealthy and harmful for literature to publish it.”⁶⁵ The resolution was, however, defeated. The author Qāzī ‘Abd al-Ghaffār objected to the resolution, saying that “sex is also one of the most important questions of our society.”⁶⁶ All the same, the question of the relationship between sexual justice and progressive writing remained an open one within the PWA.

In 1946, Chughtai and Manṭo were put on trial in Lahore for obscenity. The delay between the charges and the trial was at least in part due to the writers’ attempts to have the charges dismissed, particularly on account of the hardship for Chughtai to travel to Lahore as a young mother. As explored above, in Chughtai’s “Liḥāf” the sexual practices of these women were never named outright, nor did they define the sexual identity of the characters involved; rather, in her account of the trial she claimed that she was simply relating stories she had heard in her social circles. Making a mockery of the case brought against her, Chughtai wrote:

liḥāf ko faḥsh ṣābit karne vāle gavāh hamāre vakīl kī jarḥ se kucch būkhlā se rahe the. kahānī meṇ ko ’ī lafẓ qābil-e girift nahīn mil rahā thā. bare soch bichār ke ba ’d ek ṣāhib ne farmāyā ki yih jumla ... ’āshiq jam ’ kar rahī thīn faḥsh hai. kaunsā lafẓ faḥsh hai? jam ’ yā ’āshiq? vakīl ne pūchhā. lafẓ ’āshiq! guvāh ne zarrā takalluf se kahā.

65 *faḥḥāshī ke jo rujḥānāt parvān charḥ rahe hain un kā taraqqī pasand taḥrīk aur taraqqī pasand adab ke nazariye se ko ’ī ta ’alluq nahīn hai. taraqqī pasand adīb faḥḥāshī ke khalāf hain aur us ke izhār ko adab ke liye ghair ṣiḥḥatmand aur muzirr samjhate hain.* Ibid., 98.

66 *jins bhī hamāre samāj ke aḥamm masā’il meṇ hai.* Ibid., 99.

*mā'ī lārḍ, lafẓ 'āshiq baṛe baṛe shu 'arā ne bardī farāvānī se isti 'māl kiṃ hai aur na 'toṇ meṇ isti 'māl kiṃ gayā hai. is lafẓ ko allāhvāloṇ ne baṛā muqaddas maqām diṃ hai.*⁶⁷

The witness responsible for proving “Liḥāf” obscene was cowed by my lawyer’s questioning. He could find no word in “Liḥāf” worthy of grabbing on to. After a lot of thinking he said: “This phrase ‘...collecting lovers’ is obscene.”

“Which word is obscene: ‘collect’ or ‘lover’?” The lawyer asked.

“Lover, (‘āshiq)” replied the witness hesitatingly.

“My lord, the word ‘lover’ has been used by great poets in abundance. It is also used in poems praising the Prophet Muhammad. Godly people have given this word a holy status.”

It is at this point in her account that the witness clarified the real reason for his objection to the story:

*“un kā zikr karnā faḥāshī nahīṇ magar ek sharīf khāndān kī ta ‘līm-yāfta ‘aurat kā un ke bāre meṇ likhnā qābil-e malāmat hai.” guvāh ṣāhib zor se garje. “to shauq se malāmat farmā ‘e magar qānūn kī girift ke qābil nahīṇ.”*⁶⁸

“Referring to them is not obscene but for an educated woman from a decent family to write about such things deserves condemnation,” the witness yelled.

“Condemn to your heart’s content but it does not come within the scope of the law.”

By writing about the active sexuality of women, Chughtai was categorized by her detractors as engaging in a reprehensible act—reprehensible because a woman’s sexual autonomy violates the closed structure of the home and woman’s confinement to the private sphere. While representations of sexuality, even female sexuality, had been acceptable within the Urdu tradition, sexual expression by someone identified as a woman, particularly one belonging to a respectable class was unacceptable.

In Chughtai’s account, when the witness for the prosecution realized his case was faltering, he directly approached her and told her that if she agreed to apologize, her legal fees

67 Chughtā’ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 50.

68 Ibid.

would be paid for. She refused and was called to the judge's chamber. She recounted the judge as saying: "I have often read your stories and they aren't obscene, nor is 'Liḥāf'" obscene. But Manto's writings are full of filth."⁶⁹ Though his pronouncement of judgment would have exonerated her from the charge of obscenity, she was not satisfied allowing him the prerogative of censoring Manto's stories. In her recollection of her response, I read a justification for the idea that artists must represent the world in all of its complication, even those aspects of the human experience that may seem improper. Chughtai retorted, "The world is also littered with filth."⁷⁰ The judge then asked Chughtai, "Is it necessary to throw it up in the air?"⁷¹ The character of the judge presents the view that perhaps artists should ignore the unpleasant, disturbing, and confusing aspects of the human experience for the sake of propriety and not serve as a potentially corrupting influence on the audience. Chughtai's account of her response provides a powerful take on the stakes of literature and the arts, "throwing it around makes it visible and we can turn our attentions towards cleaning up."⁷² In other words, even if certain members of the audience find the subject of extra-marital or homoerotic sexual relationships to be distasteful or dirty, literature should address all of the realities of life—including the distasteful and dirty. By exposing the realities of the human experience to the reader, writers foster the moral education of their readers by exposing them to the breadth of possibilities in human life and relationships and thus provide the opportunity to question the realities of society. If they wish to do so, readers may thus work towards progress towards a more equitable and just society.

69 *main ne āp kī akṣar kahāniyāṅ parhī haiṅ aur vuh faḥsh nahīṅ. aur na liḥāf faḥsh hai. magar manṭo kī taḥrīroṅ meṅ barī ḡhilāẓat bharī hotī hai.* Ibid., 51.

70 *dunyā meṅ bhī ḡhilāẓat bharī hai.* Ibid.

71 *to kyā zurūrī hai ki usse uchhālā jā'e?* Ibid.

72 *uchhālne se vuh naẓar ā jātī hai aur ṣafā'ī kī ṭaraf dhyān jā saktā hai.* Ibid.

The political aims of Chughtai's writing, to provoke her readers into "cleaning up" social injustice, distinguish her work, and the work of the Progressives in general, from other contemporary writers. During the early 1940s, the editor of the journal *Adabī Duniyā* in Lahore, the poet Mīrājī, had helped to form another literary organization in Lahore, called the *Ḥalqa-e Arbāb-e Zauq*, the "Circle of Men of Taste." Over time, the group, whose membership had in its early phases counted many avowedly progressive writers, came to move away from the Progressive writers, splitting over the question of the politicization of literature. As the PWA moved towards a unified stance of political activism and socialist realism, the Arbāb-e Zauq encouraged literary creativity and individualism, which led to them being branded as "art for art's sake" (*adab barā-e adab*) writers. The first position ultimately is termed Progressive (*taraqqī-pasand*) or, sometimes denigrated as truth-worshipping (*ḥaqīqat-parast*) and socialist (*ishtirākī*), while the those who took the latter stance claimed the term Modernist (*jadīd*) to distinguish themselves from the Progressives.⁷³ Of course, writing is never either wholly apolitical or wholly non-individualist, but the categories of Progressive and Modernist have served to include and exclude authors in the process of the canonization of Urdu literature. In particular, Mīrājī's explorations of the underlying causes of human sexual behavior were branded as deviant and abnormal by Progressive writers. Unlike Chughtai, he was ultimately excluded from the PWA.

By the late 1940s, the PWA demanded that Progressive writers treat the lives of labourers and peasants as their subjects.⁷⁴ The 1949 manifesto of the organization specifically linked

73 See Patel, *Lyrical Movements, Historical Hauntings*, 83–128; Pue, *I Too Have Some Dreams*, 5–8.

74 "On the whole, a special weakness of progressive literature has been that it has not fully cooperated as it should have with the people who were being led by the working class.

individualism, obscenity, and sensationalism with capitalist exploitation.⁷⁵ Writing much later about this period of the Progressive Movement, Chughtai said,

My own friends pronounced that Manto⁷⁶ and I indulged in sex-related vulgar storywriting [...] I picked up and took from the Progressive Movement all that I liked, but I always trusted in my personal convictions. For instance, at one point the policy of the party became rigid and it was decided that Progressive literature is only that which is written about the peasant and the labourer. Clearly, I could not know about the laborer and peasant as closely as I could feel the pain of middle and lower class people. And I have never written on hearsay, never written according to any set rules, and never have I followed the orders of any party or association. Independent thinking was always my nature and still is.⁷⁷

Instead of agreeing to grand statements that would divorce progressive literature from the contexts she felt most comfortable writing about, Chughtai unearthed the sexist objectification of women among Progressive writers themselves. Reporting on the 1949 AIPWA conference, she recounted stumbling across a private gathering of male Progressive authors reciting sexually explicit poetry after the day's activities were done.⁷⁸ Chughtai related these all-male poetry

Hence, we find a dearth of creative literature where we are given a glimpse of the life and struggle of the peasants and workers." Coppola, "Urdu Poetry, 1935-1970," 286.

75 Quoting from the 1949 Manifesto: "Those writers who depend on the capitalists raise the slogan of 'Art for art's sake' and applaud the concept of individualism in literature. They produce a literature that is obscene, naked and sensational." Ibid. 284.

76 On Manto's quite negative reaction to the condemnation of the PWA, see Jalal, *The Pity of Partition*, 163–174.

77 *merī apne sāthī bhī yihī faiṣala kar chuke the ki main aur manṭo jinsī kahāniyān likhte haiṅ [...] taraqqī pasand taḥrīk se main ne vuh sab kuchh chun kar sameṭ liyā jo merī dil ko lagā magar main ne apne zātī yaqīn par hamesha bharosa kiyā. maṣalan jab pārṭī kī pālīsī meṅ saḳht-gīrī baṛhī aur faiṣala huā ki taraqqī pasand adab vuhī hai jo kisān aur mazdūr ke bāre main likhā jā'e. zāhir hai main mazdūr aur kisān ko itne qarīb se nahīn jān saktī thī jitnī main dar miyāna ṭabqa aur nichle ṭabqe ke insān ke dukh dard ko maḥsūs kar saktī thī. aur main ne kabhī sunī sunā 'ī par nahīn likhā. uṣūlon meṅ bandh kar nahīn likhā. kisī pārṭī yā anjuman ke ḥukm se nahīn likhā. āzād-khayālī merī fīṭrat thī aur ab bhī hai. Chughtā'ī, "Taraqqī pasand adab aur main," 11.*

78 Chughtā'ī, "Bamba'ī se Bhopāl tak," 82.

session to the abuses of women paraded through the streets as sex-slaves in war zones.

Ultimately Chughtai was not interested in an uncritical promotion of all things sexual; rather, sexual topics were approached through her particular interest in instigating social change.

“Liḥāf” has taken on a life of its own in Indian intellectual and cultural history. One of the waves of interest in “Liḥāf” occurred during the controversy surrounding Deepa Mehta’s 1996 “Fire,” an extremely popular and controversial film, which was one of the first in South Asian history to depict same-sex relationships.⁷⁹ Members of the Hindu right attacked theaters that screened the film. In response to claims by right-wing organizations that same-sex relationships were alien to Indian culture, a myth originating from colonial efforts to rein what was perceived to be the sexual deviance of the precolonial period,⁸⁰ Nirupama Dutt described “Fire” as “Mehta’s celluloid reinterpretation of ‘Liḥāf.’” She continues, “lesbian love [...] was well thrashed out in public in modern times with the publication of Chughtai’s famous Urdu short story Lihaaf (The Quilt) 56 years ago.”⁸¹ An editorial in the Chandigarh tribune claimed that,

79 For more on the controversy surrounding the film see: Shohini Ghosh, *Fire* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010); Geeta Patel, “On Fire: Sexuality and Its Incitements,” in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 222–33; Monica Bachmann, “After the Fire,” in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 234–44.

80 Inheriting this legacy of colonialism, today it is common for Indian right-wing organizations to claim that homosexuality is alien to Indian culture, and was either brought to India by Muslims or by colonizing Europeans themselves. See Ruth Vanita, “Homophobic Fiction/Homoerotic Advertising: The Pleasures and Perils of Twentieth-Century Indianness,” in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2002), 127–48.

81 Nirupama Dutt, “Editorial: Playing with Fire,” *Indian Express*, December 13, 1998, http://www.cscsarchive.org:8081/_e52568520028afa7.nsf/0/dfb3efc052f8699265256940004d0d36!OpenDocument&Highlight=0,fire.

“Fire should not be a new thing for those who have read Chughtai’s *Lihaaf*.”⁸² Rather than referring to the long history of Islamicate erotic poetry, critics identified *Liḥāf* as the forebear of *Fire*. I argue that this is due to the accessibility of the short story form, and perhaps the distance of pre-modern poetry, for modern readers, particularly Indian readers of English. Such references to the “lesbian love” of “*Liḥāf*” draw more heavily on the reception of the story than an engagement with the text itself.

In addition to invoking the text as a precedent for the depiction of same-sex love in the arts, the phenomenon of approaching “*Liḥāf*” as a symbol rather than a complex text is further supported by the frequent invocation of Chughtai and “*Liḥāf*” as precedents for lesbian identity more broadly. A 2008 article in the Pakistani magazine *Newsline* entitled “Under the Quilt,” discussed the challenges faced by self-identified lesbians in Pakistan, all couched within a discussion of “*Liḥāf*.” The author describes *Liḥāf* as “the story of the chance discovery of lesbian love by an innocent girl.”⁸³ Taking into account these various references to “*Liḥāf*,” it is clear that Chughtai’s work has become an icon of sexual identity within contemporary South Asia. Ironically, the relationship of Begam Jān and Rubbū, which was the focus of the 1946 obscenity trial, remains the most widely known aspect of the story—and of Chughtai’s work in general—though it is now given a positive valence.

Off the Screen: Sexual Justice and the World of Bombay Cinema

During the 1940s, as the Bombay film industry became a hub for the Urdu-writing

82 “Editorial: Fire, Fear, and Frenzy,” *The Tribune (Chandigarh)*, December 15, 1998, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/1998/98dec15/edit.htm>.

83 Rinku Dutta, “Under the Quilt,” *Newsline (Karachi)*, June 2006, <http://www.newsline.com.pk/NewsJune2006/lifestylejune.htm>.

intelligentsia like Chughtai and other Progressive writers. Chughtai and Latif used the medium to portray the same themes Chughtai had treated as a writer to a broader audience. This was particularly important as other sources of literary patronage dwindled, especially as centers of Urdu publishing shifted to Pakistan after Partition. Since the nineteenth century, Urdu authors had been employed as writers in Bombay theatre (the so-called “Parsi theatre”),⁸⁴ and with the first talkie films of the 1930s, Urdu authors were in high demand from the new film studios which had begun to dot the city’s landscape.⁸⁵ When Chughtai moved to Bombay, Latif had already established himself as an integral member of the writing team at Bombay Talkies. Likewise, Manto and Kaifi ‘Azmi (henceforth Kaifi Azmi, 1919-2002), friends of the couple, had also taken up writing jobs in cinema.⁸⁶ Chughtai began writing film dialogue for the film *Chhed Chhād* (*Mischief*), directed by K. Amarnath in 1943. Shortly after independence, Bombay Talkies acquired the film rights to Chughtai’s novella *Ziddī* (*Stubborn*) for Rs. 25,000, a considerable sum of money.⁸⁷ Latif was the director of the film. In their joint efforts in film,

84 See Somanātha Gupta, *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origin and Development*, trans. Kathryn Hansen (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005).

85 For a history of early Hindi cinema in Bombay, see Erik Barnouw and Subrahmanyam Krishnaswamy, *Indian Film*, 2d ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). See also Suresh Chabria and Virchand Dharamsey, eds., *Light of Asia: Indian Silent Cinema, 1912-1934*, Rev. and expanded ed. (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2013). On the prominence of Muslim writers in Hindi cinema, see Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema* (New Delhi, India: Tulika Books, 2009).

86 For an insider’s view of the world of Hindi cinema in the 1940s, see Sa‘ādat Ḥasan Maṭo, *Stars from Another Sky: The Bombay Film World in the 1940s*, trans. Khalid Hasan (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998).

87 The film notably helped the fledgling careers of Kishore Kumar and Lata Mangeshkar, two of the most prominent singers in Bombay Cinema. It also launched the acting career of Dev Anand, who became one of Hindi cinema’s greatest stars. See Dev Anand’s autobiography, Dev Anand, *Romancing with Life: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2007), 81–89.

Chughtai was usually credited as a writer and Latif as director, yet she was usually at the filming and assisted with direction as well. They worked together closely on a number of films until Latif's death in 1967.

In the film *Ziddī*, older structures of affinity and authority (caste, religion, etc.) are subjugated to the rights of the individual citizen as afforded by the state. *Ziddī* is the story of the son of a landlord named Pūran who falls in love with Āshā, an orphan from the village who was taken in as a servant in his household. When the two are caught together, they attempt to run away from the family by carriage. Pūran's older brother pursues them by car, resulting in an accident. Pūran is tricked into believing that Āshā is dead after the family sent her away. Pūran is married off but never wavers from his devotion to Āshā and encourages his wife to run away with another man. When chiding him for allowing his wife to run away and thus bringing disgrace to the family, Pūran tells his brother: "For the sake of honor you snatched everything away from me!"⁸⁸ His older brother chides him: "There should a limit to one's stubbornness!"⁸⁹ Pūran's uncle, his only support within the family, replies: "Stubbornness? You're the stubborn one!"⁹⁰ The question of where to place the blame in such a conflict is a central concern of the film. Are individuals, most often lovers, stubborn and headstrong if they wish to go against the decisions and guidelines of their families? Or is it the old patriarchal system embodied by the landlord's family that is stubborn and stuck in its own ways? Here the film celebrates individual autonomy. Pūran's right to love and marry as he pleases trumps the traditional expectation of his duty to please his family. Ultimately his family accepts their defeat after the tragic death of

88 *āp ne khāndān kī 'izzat ke liye merā sab kuchh chīn liyā.*

89 *lekin zidd kī bhī ko'ī ḥadd hotī hai.*

90 *zidd? ziddī ho tum!*

Pūran's wife and they bring Āshā home as a daughter-in-law. It could be argued that this triumphant end is a particularly modern outcome. In classical Urdu or Persian literature, there would most likely be a tragic end to these star-crossed lovers.

Though the story of forbidden love is common, love crossing class boundaries also represents a challenge to the economic disparity between landlords and servants and social restrictions enforced due to those disparities. The love plot is at its core one about the individual as deserving of agency, irrespective of communal or familial norms. It is almost a comical trope that what is now called "Bollywood" revolves around the hackneyed story of lovers who must face community approbation, but this should not be taken as something without social consequence. From a bourgeois perspective on cultural capital, working in popular cinema might seem to be a step down from lofty realm of literature. Conversely, I would argue that many Progressive writers were involved in Bombay cinema because, in their cinematic creations, they were able to significantly shape discourses surrounding love, marriage, sexuality, family and religion.

Hand-in-Hand: Sexual and Social Progress in "Do Hāth" (A Pair of Hands)

In order to illustrate the interconnectedness of social, economic, and sexual progress in the writing of Chughtai, I will now examine an example of a short story published at the peak of Chughtai's career. In 1960, Chughtai published "Do Hāth" (A Pair of Hands) in the journal *Nuqūsh* in Karachi.⁹¹ In this story, a sweeper (*mehtar*) named Rām Avtār is called away to serve in the war effort. In his absence, his wife Gorī becomes a source of concern for the townspeople and landlords alike, who fear the temptation of a woman whose husband is away. Mirroring the

91 First publication: 'Iṣmat Chughṭā'ī, "Do hāth," *Nuqūsh (Karachi)*, November 1960, 27–32.

gossip of the townspeople, the narrator recounts that after a period of intense mourning for her war-bound husband, “bit by bit, the length of the veil over her face grew shorter.”⁹²

The presence of Gorī disturbs the wives of the washermen, the cooks, as well as the daughters-in-law at the landlord’s manor. They eventually request the landlady, the narrator’s mother, to ask for Gorī to be sent back to her parents. Rām Avtār’s mother, a sweeperess, demurs. The bride-price paid for Gorī was two hundred rupees and she does the work of four people with her pair of hands. The room of petitioning women grows uncomfortable, as “the matter shifted from one of morality to one of economics.”⁹³ Yet, in Chughtai’s literary universe morality and economics are, in fact, inseparable. As the wealthiest and powerful woman, the landlady has the responsibility and the ability to tell the sweeper what to do. Yet the sweeperess is the only one willing to clarify the economic meaning and impact of the hierarchies of sexual morality.

When Rām Avtār’s cousin, Ratī Rām, comes to stay with Gorī and her mother-in-law, Gorī loses her fearsome attraction, covers herself up and stops flirting with the townsmen. If anyone tries to bother her, she looks to Ratī Rām for support. Despite some gossip about the relationship between Ratī Rām and Gorī, villagers mostly heave a sigh of relief. They are once again agitated, however, when Gorī shows signs of pregnancy and gives birth to a son long after her husband’s departure. As Rām Avtār is about to return from the war two years later, his mother sends him a telegram that his wife has borne him a son. The village is astir with expectations of a catastrophe when Rām Avtār returns. The only person in the village who seems

92 *phir āhista āhista us ke ghūnghaṭ kī lambā’ī kam hone lagī. ‘Iṣmat Chughṭā’ī, ‘Iṣmat Chughṭā’ī ke afsāne. Jild-e sivvum (Dihlī: Kitābī Duniyā, 2006), 1–2.*

93 *mu’āmila akhlāqiyāt se haṭ kar iqtisādiyāt par ā gayā thā. Ibid., 5.*

happy with the child is Rām Avtār's mother—she goes from house to house collecting baby clothes and money, spending her days waiting for Rām Avtār's return, playing with the child.

Despite the expectations of everyone in the village, Ram Avtār is overjoyed when he receives his mother's telegram. He returns to the village after being away for three years, and greets his one-year-old son with new socks and new undershirts. The town is flabbergasted—how could Ram Avtār be so stupid as to think that this child was his own progeny? The local landlord, father of the narrator of the story, tries to make Rām Avtār stop celebrating this illegitimate child's birth. Rām Avtār does not comprehend the landlord's demand that he calculate the time he was away as it relates to the birth of the child, replying that the child is God's gift (*bhagvān kī den*).⁹⁴ Even when the landlord directly tells Rām Avtār the child is not his, Rām Avtār has a surprising reaction, speaking in a rustic dialect, the landlord says:

“magar laundā terā nahīṇ rām avtār. us ḥarāmī ratī rām kā hai.” abbā ne ‘ājiz ā kar samjhāyā.
“to kā havā sarkār? merā bhā’ī hotā hai ratī rām. ko’ī gīr nahīṇ apnā hī khūn hai.”
*“nirā ullū kā puṭṭhā hai.” abbā bhinnā uṭhe.*⁹⁵

“But the boy is not yours, Ram Avtār—it's that bastard Ratī Rām's.” Abbā exclaimed in exasperation.
“So what's the difference, sir? Ratī Rām is my brother, sir, his blood is the same as mine.”
“You're a complete fool!” Abbā was worked into a tizzy.

Rām Avtār does not care that the child is not his biological son. He reasons that it does not matter that the child is not his own, as Ratī Rām is his cousin-brother, and their blood is interchangeable. Abbā's exclamation points to an inability to process Rām Avtār's nonchalance regarding the paternity of the child, not its implications for the sexual activity of his wife.

94 Ibid., 11.

95 Ibid.

Through the voice of Rām Avtār as he pleads with the narrator's father to accept the child regardless of social convention, the story entreats readers to view the child as a legitimate and important member of the community and Rām Avtār's family. Neither the villagers nor Abbā himself understand Rām Avtār's and his mother's joy at the birth of the son, but Rām Avtār explains:

*“vuh do hāth lagā ’egā, so apnā burhāpā ter ho jā ’egā.” nadāmat se rām avtār kā sar jhuk gayā.
aur na jāne kyūn, ek dam rām avtār ke sāth sāth abbā kā sar bhī jhuk gayā. jaise un ke zihn par lākhon karōṇ hāth chā ga’e. yih hāth harāmī haiṇ na ḥalālī. yih to bas jīte jāgte hāth haiṇ jo dunyā ke chihre se ghalāzat dho rahe haiṇ us ke burhāpe kā būjh uṭhā rahe haiṇ.”⁹⁶*

“He will use his two hands, that’s the way I’ll survive my old age.” Ram Avtār’s head bowed down in shame,
And, who knows why, suddenly Abbā’s head also bowed down with Ram Avtār’s as if thousands and hundreds of thousands of hands were bearing down on his mind. These hands are not illegitimate, neither are they legitimate. These are just the living, moving hands that are washing away the filth from the face of the Earth and are carrying the burden of its old age.”

For Rām Avtār, the paternity of the child is simply immaterial. The child is a living being, one who will pull his own weight in the community, and one who will fulfill the duties of a child to his father. The text here points to the child’s humanity, echoing the title of the story. It is the landlord most of all who is disturbed by the sexual behaviors of Gorī, but for the family of sweepers, nothing is more important than survival.

In “Do Hāth,” Ram Avtār’s wife Gorī’s sexual relationship with another man and the child conceived and born during her husband’s three-year absence is, in the end, depicted as irrelevant to her husband and mother-in-law. In this way, her sexuality is something that she is entitled to, irrespective of whether a child is born from extramarital relations. There are no illegitimate human beings. The poor especially cannot afford to and do not reject them. Survival

96 Ibid., 12.

is the great equalizer, with sexual morality framed as a distinctly middle-class concern. At the end, Chughtai concludes, “These tiny, darling, soiled, black hands are adorning the part of the earth’s hair with vermillion.”⁹⁷ The poor, the downtrodden, the outcast are likened to the spouses of the earth itself, those who provide for its sustenance. Two hands are a powerful symbol for what defines a human being and serves to equalize the constructed social, economic and sexual hierarchies.

In her autobiographical texts, Chughtai wrote of how the imbalance between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor concerned her since her early childhood. For example, she recounts that one of her earliest memories was of a merciless beating of a child:

main zār u qatār ro rahī thī. ko ’ī kisī ko barī be dardī se mār rahā thā [...] kaun mār rahā thā, kisse aur kyūn mār rahā thā, yih qī ’ī yād nahīn kyūn ki main us vaqt bahut chhoī thī. magar moṭā bīnt jab paṭne vale kī haḍiyon par bajtā thā to barī khaufnāk chaṭākhe dār āvāz nikaltī thī jo ab tak mere kān meṅ mahfūz hai aur akṣar sunā ’ī detī hai.

I was sobbing profusely. Someone was mercilessly beating someone else. [...] Who was doing the beating? Who was being beaten, and why? I have absolutely no recollection of any of these things, as I was very young at the time. Yet, as the thick cane struck the bones of the beaten child, it caused a frightful, crackling sound that still reverberates in my ears, and I continue to hear it often.⁹⁸

Claiming that witnessing this beating as one of her foundational memories marks it as a symbol of what is endemic to the world, the suffering of the weak at the hands of the strong. She then elaborated on what she learned from this experience:

shāyad jab hī se mujhe ma ’lūm ho gayā ki barā chhoṭe ko mārta hai. aur tāqatvar kamzor ko mārta hai. tāqatvar ek qad-e ādam sutūn kī tarḥ mere lā-shu ’ūr meṅ kharā ho gayā, jis ke pairon milte kamzor koṛe kī tarḥ pahelā hu ’ā thā. tab merā

97 *yih nanhe munne miṭṭī meṅ lathare hu ’e siyāh hāth dhartī kī māng meṅ sīndūr sajā rahe hai* Ibid., 24.

98 Chughtai, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 19.

*sar t̤āqatvar ke ḥuḏūr meṇ jhak gayā aur kamzor se ghin āne lagī.*⁹⁹

It was probably from that moment that I realized that big beats the small and the powerful beats the weak. The strong man stood in my subconscious like a pillar at whose feet the weak was laid out like garbage. Then my head bowed in obeisance of the powerful and the weak started making me feel sick.

This seeming acceptance of a young Chughtai of the hierarchies and power dynamics illustrates her honesty about the temptations of power. Perhaps it would easiest to accept things as they are and feel disgusted at the weak. Yet, I would argue that her acknowledgement herself, and indeed her readers, as culpable for the suffering of the weakest in society is a major step in struggling to end injustice. She immediately followed this admission with a hint at how one can overcome injustice:

*phir bhī dil meṇ ek chor thā, jo khud mujh se chhup kar baiṭh gayā. jab kabhī main kisī ‘ālīshān maḥal ko dekhī jis par kā’ī jam jāī aur ghās be-rahīmī se chā jāī to dil meṇ dubkā chor chupke chupke muskurā uṭhtā aur ghās-phūns kī be-bisāṭ t̤āqat kā ro ‘b merī dil par baiṭh jāī.*¹⁰⁰

But there was a thief in my heart, who hid without my noticing. Whenever I saw a lofty building that had moss stuck to it and was overgrown with weeds, the thief in my heart smiled secretly and power of seemingly insignificant weeds stayed in my heart.”

The image of a child being beaten is the very picture of abject suffering. The temptation for Chughtai was to bow down to the powerful and be repulsed by the weak, but instead, she indicated the ways in which power structures could and should be undermined. Slowly chipping away at the power structures is the only way to work towards a more just society. No matter how strong the edifice of grandeur and power, the smallest of weeds can make cracks appear.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

Conclusion

The 1930s and 1940s were a time of great change and efflorescence in Urdu literature. With the advent of the Progressive Writers' Movement inspired by the banned short fiction collection, *Angāre*, Ismat Chughtai and writers of her generation struggled to understand and combat systems of injustice and explore the significance of literature for progressive social change. Chughtai was a sometimes-controversial member of the Progressive Writers' Movement due to her treatment of sexuality, termed by her detractors as sex-worship (*jins-parastī*). Yet, close readings of her stories including "Liḥāf," "Do Hāth," and the film *Ziddī* elucidate that her discussions of sexuality were not an end in and of themselves: they were in the service of a progressive social agenda.

Rather than a prurient obsession with sexuality or a celebration of alternative lifestyles, her discussions of sexuality was one that called into question assumptions about women and men, children and elders, servants and landlords. In her literary and intellectual universe, no understanding of the economic hierarchies and injustice could be understood without an investigation of the role of sex and sexuality. Chughtai aimed to bring the tacitly unacknowledged issues within Indian households the forefront so that they could be addressed.

For contemporary Indian activists struggling to find precedents and foremothers for their movements, Chughtai provides a compelling and convenient focal point. Women's rights and sexual rights activist in particular consistently turn to Chughtai for inspiration,¹⁰¹ even if

101 In the past year, Chughtai's essays have been highlighted as one of the must-read books to understand women's issues Shreya Ila Anasuya, "Nine Books You Must Read to Understand Women's Issues in India," *Scroll.in*, March 7, 2015, <http://scroll.in/article/711948/nine-books-you-must-read-to-understand-womens-issues-in-india>. At the Lahore Literary Festival, she was hailed as a "feminist before the modern face of feminism even existed" and a "defining influence on the modern feminist movement" Ali Sajid Imami, "LLF 2015 Satiates Literary Buffs," *Pakistan Today*,

sometimes based on the reputation of her literary celebrity rather than close engagements with her texts. Sexual autonomy and woman's freedom from the structure that binds her to the home is essential for woman's participation in the modern, secular state because of the notion of equality of citizenship irrespective of gender identity and the connection between Chughtai's work and issues of gender and sexual justice remains at the forefront of progressive social activism in India.

Chapter Three

Reform, Education, and Woman as Subject

*apnī kahāniyon meṇ aisī lar̥kī pesh kī jo purānī qānūṇ ya ‘nī jhūṭī sharm-o ḥayā kī qā’il nahīn thī. khāndānī nām-o nimūd kī khātir apnī zindagī qurbān karne ko tayyār nahīn thī.*¹

In my stories, I presented a girl who was not beholden to the old rules, namely the false notions of shame and modesty. She was not ready to sacrifice her own life for the sake of her family’s honor.

The crushing end of the Mughal Empire in 1857 precipitated a period of self-reflection by Indian Muslim intellectuals as to how such a calamity could have befallen them. Internalizing colonial historiography, which had critiqued the culture of the later Mughals as opulent, excessive, and effete, scholars began to advocate for a totalizing reform of Muslim culture extending to community organization, legal interpretation, religious practice, and literature. Such scholars drew their inspiration from ideas about the “golden age of Islam,” especially from the supposed culture of the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions. Thus, reform (*iṣlāḥ*, lit. ‘correction’) was premised on a sort of fundamentalism, as elements of culture deemed to be derived from the Persian or Indian were derided as deviating from the normative vision of originary Arab Islam which the reformers had begun to propagate.²

Social reformers of the post-1857 generation including Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī as well as Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī and Nazīr Aḥmad, saw the education of women as a necessity primarily within a context where legitimacy within the Muslim community was based on a projection of

1 Chughtā’ī, “Taraqqī pasand adab aur main,” 10.

2 Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 257–267.

respectability—*sharāfat*.³ Being a “respectable person” (*sharīf*, pl. *ashrāf*) was tied to the perception of personal piety and industry, rather than the privilege of birth that had given previous generations their hereditary rights as nobles. Among the members of this new middle class, social reform movements arose to establish new centers of religious education and to weed out elements of culture that were perceived to be superstitious, effete, immoral, or otherwise pernicious. The lack of education, including, but not limited to, religious education, among women was seen to be one cause for the perceived moral decline of the community. In fact, the change of fortunes of the Muslim community was sometimes blamed on women, and thus women’s educational efforts were shaped by a notion of both ignorant women and ideas concerning the proper place of women in society. Significantly, reformers believed women should be taught mathematics, arts and letters in addition to religion in order to best run a household.

In order to understand the changes that took place in the education system during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is necessary to appreciate what had preceded them. Prior to this period, boys’ schooling included basic instruction at home followed by religious and literary education in the Arabic and Persian languages at schools connected to the mosque.⁴ Girls were taught by relatives and female teachers, or *ustānīs*, who came to the home and were

3 See Ibid., xii, xxix–xxxi.

4 On the history of Persianate education, see for instance Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “The Making of a Munshi,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004): 61–72; G. M. D. Sufi, *Al-Minhāj, Being the Evolution of Curriculum in the Muslim Educational Institutions of India* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1941). On the transition to English education in India in the nineteenth century, see Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir, eds., *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781-1843*, London Studies on South Asia, no. 18 (Richmond: Curzon, 1999); Margrit Pernau, ed., *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

supported by Islamic endowments as well.⁵ Yet, as the private patronage for traditional teachers, *maulavīs* and *ustāds*, dwindled, this system came under pressure. The reasons for this declining patronage were many, including the spread of English schooling among the elite, as well as colonial challenges to the Islamic charitable endowments, or *awqāf*.⁶ As the charitable endowments of the Muslim community dwindled, these previously available forms of education for girls also disappeared.

I begin this chapter with an overview of the work of Muslim social reformers, in particular Nazīr Aḥmad, Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, and Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī, because their efforts to advocate for a new vision of women’s education had a great impact on Chughtai’s generation. In the early twentieth century, a generation of Indian Muslim girls, termed “the daughters of reform” by historian Gail Minault,⁷ began to attend schools that were established through the efforts of these community reformers. This chapter addresses the social conditions that made it possible for an intellectual like Chughtai to emerge. The changes to education for women and girls were essential to her formation.

Her perspective on education, however, differed greatly from that of earlier Muslim reformers. As discussed in earlier chapters, Chughtai wrote as a cultural critic depicting contexts and characters that would highlight the hierarchies and unjust disparities in Indian society. Chughtai advocated a secular formation of justice and in particular brought questions of sexuality and sexual abuse to the fore. In the epigraph to this chapter, from the essay *Taraqḡ*

5 Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 23.

6 Ibid., 21.

7 See Ibid., 269. Minault writes that this class included the daughters of the reformers themselves, along with “women educated at their schools, who wrote for magazines taught at schools, and used their qualifications to give expression to a distinctly feminine if not feminist viewpoint.”

pasand adab aur main (Progressive Literature and Me, 1979), Chughtai describes the type of character she aims to present. In opposition to the desires of the Muslim reformers, who would have advocated an educated woman be primarily involved with the domestic sphere, this character claims her life for herself by rejecting the “old rules” (*purānī qānūn*). In this chapter, I argue that Chughtai deployed narratives of education as foundational to the formation of such an emancipated girl, who would become her desired female subject.

Chughtai’s first novel, *Ṭerhī Lakīr* (*The Crooked Line*, 1944), centers on the protagonist, Shaman, as she matures from childhood to womanhood. Many of her experiences are framed within educational institutions, both as a student and a teacher. In *Ṭerhī Lakīr*, education is the site of a sometimes-uncomfortable transformation. Outside her fiction writing, Chughtai also crafted the persona of a celebrity author whereby she came to embody her own ideals of womanhood. This authorial self-fashioning culminated in a series of autobiographical essays, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*⁸ (*The Robe is Made of Paper*, 1979-1980). As an educated woman, Chughtai’s self-definition moved beyond expectations that she would serve primarily as a wife and mother to forging an independent identity. Throughout her autobiographical essays, Chughtai posits herself as the representative of the new Indian woman. In this chapter I argue that in opposition to the narratives created by Muslim social reformers regarding the purpose of education for girls, Chughtai’s fictional and autobiographical works present the schoolgirl as one who experiments with and ultimately rejects gendered boundaries of propriety and respectability and who grows up to become a full and equal member of the Indian nation.

8 As discussed in Chapter Two, this title refers to the initial line (*maṭlaʿ*) of the first *ghazal* of the Urdu poet Ghalib: *naqsh faryādī hai kis kī shokhī-e taḥrīr kā / kāghazī hai pairahan har paikar-e taṣvīr kā*, “Whose mischievous writing is the picture suing over? / Every image-form wears a robe made of paper.”

Women's Reform

Addressing the legal status of women was a major concern of the colonial Indian state.⁹ A long series of legal reforms, including the Sati Abolition Act of 1829, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1854, and the Special Marriage Act of 1872 all affected women's status in Indian society. The Special Marriage Act was amended in 1923 to allow intercaste marriage. By 1929, women were granted the right to vote in local elections for the first time, and in the same year, the minimum age for females to be married was set at fourteen.¹⁰ Writing of reform movements in Bengal, historian Partha Chatterjee argues that in order to maintain a sense of pride in their own culture, Indians chose to adapt to colonial modernity selectively. Chatterjee posits that this was a bifurcated process. The outer, secular world was where the colonizer was perceived as superior—in governance, military prowess, business—and thus should be imitated. The inner spiritual realm was where the Indian proved his superiority. This bifurcation was a necessary tool in maintaining pride in national culture. In middle class families, women, who through practices of seclusion were restricted from participating in public life, were taken to be the representatives of this inner world, the world of the home. As Chatterjee writes, “what was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and

9 Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995). The patriarchal and imperialist underpinnings of the colonial “civilizing mission” have been strongly critiqued by Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

10 Karuna Chanana, “Social Change or Social Reform: The Education of Women in Pre-Independence India,” in *Socialization, Education, and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*, ed. Karuna Chanana (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988), 96–128.

strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture.”¹¹ Maintaining the inner dimension carried significant meaning, because reformers perceived that “the world was where the European power” had “subjugated them by virtue of its superior material culture.”¹²

Thankfully, nationalists assured their community, “it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. Here the East was undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate.”¹³ Chatterjee asserts that the obsession with maintaining the status quo when it came to gender roles was part of the nationalist project.

According to Chatterjee, under the nationalist discourse, “the new woman [...] was subject to a *new patriarchy*.”¹⁴ It is within this new patriarchy that women’s reform movements must be understood.

Within the North Indian Muslim community, several reformers took up the question of women’s education. In the late nineteenth century, ideas about *sharāfat* (respectability) were tied to the emergence of expressions of identity grounded in a new religious consciousness. As Margrit Pernau argues in her book *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, religious identity became a central concern for Indian Muslims only after the 1857 War because structures of social capital in place since Mughal times had been disrupted.¹⁵ Reformers of the late nineteenth century therefore sought to articulate new forms of Muslim identity for the emerging *ashrāf* class. The role of the woman in the family was a central concern for these reformers. Yet, as Pernau notes:

11 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 120.

12 Ibid., 121.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 127.

15 Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes*.

From the second half of the century, [...] there is hardly a single woman in Delhi whose name is known, let alone her biography and the circumstances of her life. The scarcity of information on women who actually existed stands in stark contrast to an abundance of normative texts. Here, men discussed among themselves the essential characteristics of women and what behavior was required from them, and attempted to convey this knowledge to women and to educate them to be as similar as possible to this ideal image. [...] Discussions on the behavior required of women were never concerned exclusively, or even chiefly, with women; rather, they were central to the definition of an identity and the creation of a community which also included men.¹⁶

In discourses of women's reform, woman stood in metonymically for the morals of the community and nation. The ideal woman in these works was sexually appropriate, knowledgeable about family obligations and an eager manager of the family's finances and childrearing. It is because of the idea of women as receptacle of values and breeding, the individual life histories of *ashraf* women were not the focus of writing or publishing activity. Thus, though reformers were preoccupied with women, the anxieties they expressed were rooted in their own experiences as men.¹⁷

One early text promoting the education of women in the affairs of the house was Nazīr Aḥmad's (1836 – 1912) first novel *Mirāt ul- 'Arūs* (*The Bride's Mirror*),¹⁸ which he wrote

16 Ibid., 355.

17 Here the reformers' references to women as object rather than agent parallel the ways in which Indian nationalists also invoked female icons such as the Rani of Jhansi without engaging with deeper questions of gender and equality. As Harleen Singh writes, "In nationalist rhetoric and literature, the Rani is invoked in celebratory assertion, but these theorisations oblige the creation of and make normative, a particularly male, Hindu, upper-caste public sphere. She is famous as a national icon, variously appearing on postage stamps, the names of streets and buildings and in historical and literary texts. But that also makes her irrelevant; to paraphrase Parama Roy, the Rani is that which male nationalists constantly remember in order to forget." Harleen Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi: Gender, History, and Fable in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 22.

18 Nazīr Aḥmad, *The Bride's Mirror* (*Mirāt ul- 'Arūs*): *A Tale of Life in Delhi a Hundred Years ago*, trans. G. E. Ward (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001). Aḥmad later was a major figure in the 'Alīgarḥ movement. His novel *Taubat al-Nasūḥ* "The Repentance of Nasūḥ" similarly treats the crisis of moral values among the Muslim community that

because he claimed there was a lack of texts appropriate for the moral education of his daughters. *Mirāt ul- 'Arūs* has never been out of print since it was first published in 1869, and has been termed “the first Urdu bestseller.”¹⁹ In the introduction, Aḥmad points to the examples of the Mughal princesses Nūr Jahān and Zeb al-Nisā, the current Sulṭān Begam of Bhopal, and to Queen Victoria as examples of celebrated women. What these women had in common was that their power was inherited; they were meant to stand out as exceptional. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, middle-class reformers like Aḥmad carved out a space distinct from the traditional hereditary ruling class (*nawābs*). Aḥmad concludes that unlike the few women vested with hereditary authority, his *ashrāf* readers are bound to the system of seclusion (*parda-nishīnī*),²⁰ and that their place is, for better or for worse, in the home:

arose after 1857. He also founded the first Urdu-language women’s journal *‘Iṣmat* in 1908. His grandson Shāhid was the editor of the magazine *Sāqī* that published Chughtai’s earliest writing.

- 19 Frances Pritchett, “Afterword: The First Urdu Bestseller,” in *The Bride’s Mirror (Mirāt ul- 'Arūs): A Tale of Life in Delhi a Hundred Years ago*, trans. G. E. Ward (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 204–23.
- 20 The term *parda-nishīnī* (“dwelling behind the curtain”) refers to the practice of the seclusion of women still common among Indian Muslim and Hindu families in the early twentieth century. Since women were only allowed to be seen by certain members of her family, traditional houses were constructed in such a way that segregated spaces for women (*zanāna*) were an integral feature of the middle- and upper-class Muslim home. These women were permitted to leave the home provided that they wear a covering outer garment (*burqa*). As such, the system of *parda* also entails a sharp division of labor in which a *parda*-observing woman’s work is generally confined to the home, while men generally work outside the home, sometimes traveling great distances for employment. Owing to her close relationship with the home and family, for the male Muslim reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, the *parda-nishīn* became symbolic of the private, moral sphere. See Hanna Papanek, “Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, no. 3 (June 1, 1973): 289–325; Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault, eds., *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Columbia, Mo: South Asia Books, 1982).. Because of this strict segregation in many middle-class Muslim households, Ismat Chughtai gained renown as a writer for “lifting the veil” on women’s worlds.

For you there is little hope of escape from your seclusion. Public opinion and the custom of the country have made a retired life behind the purdah obligatory and incumbent upon women, and in these days the observance of this institution is more rigid than ever. Hence, except reading and writing, there is positively no method by which you can develop your intellects.²¹

Though Aḥmad does appear to lament the system of seclusion, rather than trying to change or reform it, he argues that the only way for *ashrāf* girls to improve themselves in the home is through intellectual advancement. Unlike the notable women he mentioned by name, Ahmed argued this population of *ashraf* women had a smaller horizon of life possibilities and needed to make the best of it.

The perceived needs of the new middle class were the catalyst of much change in Urdu literature, contributing to the surge in publication of didactic novels in the late nineteenth century. In this text, specifically targeted to the education of women, Naẓīr Aḥmad presents the lives of two sisters named Akbarī and Aṣḡharī (literally, “Elder” and “Younger”). Aṣḡharī has been educated and thus is able to manage her family relationships and economic affairs much better than her older sister. In the context of women’s education, this text suggests that educating women will not separate them from traditional roles; it will actually make them better at conducting their culturally acceptable responsibilities. For Aḥmad, while a woman was responsible for maintaining family accounts and allowances, unlike certain prominent women of the Mughal period,²² she was not an independent economic actor who could invest freely in the world outside the home.

Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837 – 1914), a proponent of natural poetry and the reform of Urdu literature, was also concerned about the possible role of uneducated women in the perceived

21 Aḥmad, *The Bride’s Mirror*, 15.

22 On patronage by Mughal women, see Afshan Bokhari, *Imperial Women in Mughal India: The Piety and Patronage of Jahanara Begum* (London: I. B. Tauris, forthcoming).

decline of the Muslim community.²³ In his *Majālis al-Nisā* (*The Assemblies of Women*), completed in the 1870s, he presents a similar message to that of Naẓīr Aḥmad:²⁴ For Ḥālī, a woman:

should be able to raise her children properly, be an understanding companion to her husband, and be capable of bringing order into a disordered household. She should bring honor to her parents' name in the home into which she marries. She should become dearer to her in-laws than their own children. The husband should be the master and she the mistress of the household. She should be the source of the light of knowledge within the walls of the house. Books should be her closest companions, and paper, pen, and ink her dearest friends.²⁵

Here, Ḥālī advocates for a paradigm shift in the attitude toward women's education—the necessity of educating daughters should become just as customary as the gifts given out by rich and poor alike at weddings.²⁶ A proper, home-based education consisting of arithmetic, Urdu and English grammar and composition would thus improve the lives of women and also allow them to become advisors for their families, capable managers of the affairs of the house, and complement their husbands' role. Though advocating for the education of women, the reasoning he provides is that of maintaining an orderly and well-run domicile, not fashioning an autonomous self. A woman's accomplishments are meant to firmly be "within the walls of the house." Women's education was seen as remedying Indian Muslim waywardness and decline in honor rather than providing a means for wider life possibilities.

One of the most influential texts written to reform women's beliefs and practices was

23 For a discussion of Ḥālī's views on poetry, see the chapter one.

24 Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, *Voices of Silence: English Translation of Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali's Majālis un-Nissa and Chup ki Dad*, trans. Gail Minault (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1986).

25 Ibid., 36.

26 Ibid., 39.

Bihishtī Zavar (*The Ornament of Paradise*), composed by the Sunni Ḥanafī scholar Maulānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī (1864 – 1943), published in 1905.²⁷ Thānavī was a graduate of the recently established theological college Dār al-‘Ulūm in Deoband (est. 1867). The Deobandī School exemplified the religious values of the new middle class, which comprised its sponsors, and it played a significant role in educating the new ‘ulamā of the post-1857 period.²⁸ In *Bihishtī Zavar*, Thānavī argues that women are the source of much of the supposedly syncretistic, pagan, and ritualistic beliefs in the Indian Muslim community that according to the author had led to the corruption of the Mughals and which continue to be perpetrated in society. He introduces his work by writing:

For many years, I watched the ruination of the religion of the women of Hindustan and was heartsick because of it. I struggled to find a cure, worried because that ruin was not limited to religion but had spread beyond to everyday matters as well. It went beyond the women to their children and in many respects even had its effects on their husbands. To judge from the speed with which it progressed, it seemed that if reform did not come soon, the disease would be nearly incurable. Thus I was ever more concerned.²⁹

Though Thānavī’s bewilderment at the idea that women could effect their husbands is rather comical, his views are inherently misogynistic and religiously authoritarian³⁰ when it comes to women. Rather than seeing their religious practices as different from his own, informed by the

27 On Thānavī’s ideas about Islamic rights in historical context, see Ali Mian and Nancy Nyquist Potter, “Invoking Islamic Rights In British India: Mawlana Ashraf ‘Alī Thanawi’s Ḥuqūq Al-Islam,” *The Muslim World* 99 (2009): 312–34.

28 Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, 271–275.

29 Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf ‘Alī Thanawi’s Bihishtī Zavar: A Partial Translation with Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 47–48.

30 For further reading on the term authoritarian with relation to discourses about Islam, see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Authoritative and Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses : A Contemporary Case Study*, 2nd ed., rev. and expanded., *Authoritative and the Authoritarian in Islamic Discourses* (Austin, TX: Dar Taiba, 1997).

Deoband School, he views them as “diseased.” In order to weed out their undesirable traits, Thānavī offers women what he views as a proper moral education grounded in his idea of true Islam, one based on scripturalism and the study of the religious sciences (‘*ulūm al-dīn*) rather than on local and inherited traditions.³¹

Ignorance of the religious sciences was for Thānavī a dangerous thing, one that led to the degradation of society as a whole:

Thanks to divinely granted insight, experience, logic, and learning, I realized that the cause of this ruination is nothing other than women’s ignorance of the religious sciences. This lack corrupts their beliefs, their deeds, their dealings with other people, their character, and the whole manner of their social life. Their faith is barely spared, for they speak many words and commit many deeds that verge on infidelity. Beyond that, their words, their thoughts, and their style of behavior take root in the hearts of the children whom they nurture in their very laps. So the children’s religion is ruined, and their daily life grows vapid and tasteless. The reason is that faulty belief leads to faulty character, faulty character to faulty action, and faulty action to faulty dealings that are the root of the disquietude of society.³²

In this passage, Thānavī shows a concern for the future morals of the community. A woman is a source of danger, but also of potential reform, due to her proximity and influence on the next generation—children. Thānavī expresses the view that if only women and society were to revert to a normative Islam based on the study of the religious sciences, all of society’s problems would be ameliorated in the future. He writes that a woman who studied his *Bihishtī Zavar* from cover to cover would have the equivalent knowledge of a middling ‘Ālim.³³ Yet, the text takes a paternalistic view of women, arguing that they are deficient in intellect (‘*aql*), more given over to the carnal soul (*nafs*), and therefore participate less in rational discourse (*ma‘qūl*) and are more

31 Metcalf, *Perfecting Women*.

32 Ibid., 48.

33 Ibid., 49.

given to emotion than their male counterparts.³⁴ Herein lies the root of Thānavī's push for reform in the Muslim community. It is ultimately misogyny that intensely focuses on correcting the waywardness of women as *the* way to live a proper life, particularly when it comes to religion. The focus on religious sciences is particularly masculinist, as men held the roles of religious leaders within the community, with female *'ālimas* necessarily subordinated to their male counterparts.

Thānavī points out what he perceives to be woman's faults at length, ranging from the philosophical to the mundane, and he proposes rigid exercises to restrain the carnal soul and to promote the intellect in his text. Yet the text is not a medieval manual of spiritual exercises; in addition to religious prescriptions, interspersed through the text are practical elements—sections on how to compose a letter in polite fashion; household accounting; tips for sewing and embroidery; recipes for the manufacture of soap. Thānavī drew on Victorian domestic manuals as his model, creating a sort of Islamic home economics as a result. For Thānavī, education in no way contradicts his view that the place of a woman was in the domestic sphere; rather, he holds that education is in fact necessary for her to fulfill that role. As historian Faisal Devji notes, “the movement for women's reform was not autonomous but part of a more general Islamic ‘revivalism’ or ‘scripturalism.’”³⁵ Despite their differences, Aḥmad, Ḥālī and Thānavī all wrote about women's reform in the context of focusing on a woman's life as an integral and complementary part of a Muslim household, not treating her as an independent agent with her own life to live. This perspective was paradoxical because it was both supposed to save Indian

34 See for instance his list of “faults and annoyances” among women: *Ibid.*, 338–342.

35 Faisal Devji, “Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women's Reform in Muslim India, 1857–1900,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14, no. 1 (1991): 143.

Muslim prestige from the degradation of colonialism, yet was reflective of similar perspectives in Britain about the paramount importance of women's domesticity.

One very important figure for the development of Western-style education for Muslims was Sayyid Aḥmad Khān. In 1875, Khān famously founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later Aligarh University) as a model school to advocate the integration of an English, scientific curriculum with a religious education. Khān's efforts were directed towards boys' education. He advocated for boys to be educated in boarding schools, revealing that in his view, the home was not central in the future education of Indian Muslim men—rather, men were to go participate in the outside world. In fact, for boys, the home was presented as a corrupting place. As recorded in the 1872 *Report of the Members of the Select Committee for the Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning among Muhammedans of India*, "Syed Ahmed Khan Bahadur wished it to be particularly noted that, unless boys are kept at a distance from home [...] they will always remain ignorant, worthless, and exposed to all sorts of evils."³⁶ While Khān and the Deobandīs differed on many points, they were united in their concern for the corrupting influence of women. If the center of a woman's life is the home, and the home is full of evils of effeminate behavior and lack of industry, it follows that women were steeped in evils and should perhaps be educated.

Yet even as a growing desire arose for more educated daughters in *ashraf* homes, educating Muslim women in schools was a particular challenge, as families were hesitant to allow what was perceived to be western influence on their daughters. While boys were to be separated from the environment, for Muslim reformers, the ideal of female education was the

36 Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, *Translation of the Report of the Members of the Select Committee for the Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning among Muhammedans of India* (Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1872), 60.

opposite. As we have seen above, the role of a woman was widely held to be that of a homemaker. Thus, for girls the school had to be a continuation of the home. Minault writes:

To persuade *sharif* families to send their daughters to school, *sharif* values would have to be upheld. This meant not only teaching the Quran and maintaining strict *pardah*, but also stressing the similarities between family and school life. [...] Rather than emphasizing a clean break with traditional family ties—Sir Sayyid's idea for Aligarh boys—the girls' school should emphasize a continuation of family traditions and observances, obedience and authority.³⁷

There is a significant gendered difference in presenting school as extension of family rather than school as refuge from the corrupting influence of family.

What the reformers that we have discussed above had in common was that they all held women to be the objects, rather than the agents of reform. Despite the intentions of their creators, the boys' and girls' schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created new environments in which students interacted in ways that could not be predicted by the reformers. It was in fact precisely in these new environments that the future Progressive Writers came to meet one another, share life experiences, and form the affective bonds that would later become the framework of the organization.

In addition to schools, magazines for women became very popular in middle-class Muslim homes, in part owing to the difficulty for women of these families to leave the home.³⁸ These magazines played an important role in Chughtai's intellectual development. In her life writing, she specifically mentions the long-lived magazine *Tahzīb al-Nisvān* (The Refinement of Women), founded by Sayyid Mumtāz 'Alī (1860-1935) and his second wife Muḥammadī Begam (1878?–1908) in Lahore in 1898. The word *tahzīb* specifically recalls the refinement of morals,

37 Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 232.

38 On the role of these magazines in promoting women's education and social reform, see the classic study by Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars*.

tahzīb al-akhlāq, a phrase drawing upon the long tradition of Islamicate ethical thought. The substitution of the word *nisvān*, “women,” for *akhlāq*, “morals,” reflects the reformers’ view that women were the bearers of household morality—that to reform morality in general meant to reform women’s lives. Yet Mumtāz ‘Alī and Muḥammadī Begam differed from the aforementioned reformers in notable ways. In 1898, Mumtāz ‘Alī, who like Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī had graduated from Deoband, wrote a polemical work entitled *Huqūq-e Nisvān* (The Rights of Women), which systematically argues against the view that women are intellectually inferior to men and promoted reforms in education, purdah, and marriage to ameliorate the rights of women.³⁹ For Mumtāz ‘Alī, woman was to take an active role in reform rather than to be treated as an object of reform. In the same year that *Huqūq-e Nisvān* was published, Mumtāz ‘Alī and his wife Muḥammadī Begam brought out the first issue of the journal *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*, which continued to be published by members of their family until its end in the 1950s. Mumtāz ‘Alī emphasized that he was only the financial manager of the journal, and that Muḥammadī Begam had full editorial responsibilities for its contents. An educated woman, Muḥammadī Begam wrote much of the content for the journal, and embodied an ideal of a pious, educated wife, mother, and home-maker who was simultaneously equal partner with her husband in a joint enterprise. Under Muḥammadī Begam’s decade-long editorship of the journal, the number of female contributions to *Tahzīb al-Nisvān* increased dramatically. Muḥammadī Begam also published works critiquing the institution of child-marriage, promoting women’s schools, and guides of etiquette for women at social gatherings, a genre of text which reflected the increasing

39 Sayyid Mumtāz ‘Alī, *Huqūq-e Nisvān* (Lahore: Maṭba‘-e Rifāh-e ‘Āmm-e Panjāb, 1898). For a summary of the book and its legacy, see Gail Minault, “Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and ‘Huquq Un-Niswan’: An Advocate of Women’s Rights in Islam in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Modern Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (1990): 147–72.

mobility of *purdah*-observing women at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁰

Magazines like *Tahzīb al-Nisvān* were instrumental in creating a common discourse amongst Urdu-speaking women across diverse geographic regions in India. Such magazines were powerful disseminators of ideas. It is through such magazines that the names of other educated women came to be known to each other. Minault writes, “magazines were able to reach behind the *purdah* and included (1) practical information about health, child care, nutrition, recipes, embroidery patterns; (2) news about new schools for girls, women’s associations, women in other countries; and (3) creative writing: short stories, serialized novels, poetry on themes ‘suitable’ for female readers.”⁴¹ As an outlet into the public sphere for otherwise secluded women, women’s magazines helped to empower the intellectual development of a generation of Indian girls like Chughtai, who for the first time were able to share, discuss, and debate ideas across a broad geographic area. Magazines also established the power and import of literature. At the same time, while these magazines did to a degree press for *purdah* reform (such as advocating the adoption of a *burqa* ‘with a removable face-covering), they did not fundamentally question the system as a whole and men’s accompanying moral anxieties in the way that Chughtai would in her work. She would use this medium provided by the education offered to her at Aligarh and Isabella Thoburn College to push the accepted boundaries of a woman’s subjectivity.

40 Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 110–122.

41 Ibid., 106.

Desire and Exploration in *Ṭeṛhī Lakīr* (*The Crooked Line*, 1944)

In 1944, Chughtai published her first full-length novel, *Ṭeṛhī Lakīr* in Lahore by the press Nayā Idāra, owned by Chaudharī Nazīr Aḥmad, one of the editors of *Adab-e Laṭīf*. Set in the late colonial period, approximately the 1920s-30s, the novel is a coming-of-age story about a Muslim girl named Shaman. Much of the story is set in girls' schools and women's colleges, and the exploration and development of self in the text relates to sexuality. The novel is filled with examples of the protagonist's infatuations and relationships with her fellow schoolgirls and teachers, and eventually with male students and colleagues. It treats the disciplining of Shaman's sexuality as formative.

In *Ṭeṛhī Lakīr*, the homosocial environment of the girls' school that is meant to protect girls from corrupting influences has its own temptations, limits and boundaries. Through experimentation with these boundaries and subsequent punishment from the establishment or stigmatization of their peers, the girls work out for themselves forms of selfhood that are deemed appropriate. For example, the novel describes some of the games that the girls play, "Only last month some of the girls from the lower classes had been punished for playing dirty games. Crouched inside quilts, they were busy delivering each other's babies! May god forgive us!"⁴² Chughtai uses language evasively as a literary technique. The game is a boundary zone approaching overt sexuality. Just as in "Lihaf" the narrator describes what the narrator hears but not what she sees, here Chughtai uses an image tied to motherhood, heterosexual reproduction and biology as a way of talking about female sexuality. Though delivering babies is a necessity

42 *abhi guzashta mahine chhoi kilason ki bachiyon ko be-hoda khel khelne par saza mili thi. vuh lihafon mein dabki hu'i ek dusre ko bache janva rahi thin! tauba!!* 'Ismat Chughtai', *Ṭeṛhī lakīr* (Alhamra Publishing: Islamabad, 2002), 83. Ismat Chughtai, *The Crooked Line*, trans. Tahira Naqvi, Asian Writers Series (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995), 61.

of life, when played as a game between girls it calls to mind images of exposed bodies and physical intimacy.

Shaman's infatuation with one teacher in particular supersedes all former marks of belonging and identity. This consuming obsession exceeds even her admiration for her family and God,

usse apne rishta-dāron se lagā'o thā kuchh yūnhī sā, khūdā se ɖartī thī magar us ke khiyāl meṇ gharq kabhī na ho sakī. lekin Miss Charan us ke li'e apne khūn aur imān se bhī ziyāda buḍh ga'ī thī. vuh 'umūman un kī takhayyulī mūrāt ko 'aqīdat aur intihā'ī joshīle muḥabbat bhare jazbāt meṇ ḍūbī, pūjā kartī --- vuh ā'īṇ Miss Charan --- vuh ga'īṇ --- vuhān ke sārī hilī aur bilā'oz chamkā. [...] vuh har vaqt apne āp ko un ke pās maḥsūs kartī. vuh kharī hai, Miss Charan kī khiyālī hevla pās se guzar gayā hai. vuh khud so rahī hai, Miss Charan usse thapak rahī haiṇ. vuh pyāsī hai, ḥalq chaṭkā jā rahā hai aur Miss Charan us ke munh meṇ ṭhanḍe ṭhanḍe khushbū-dār 'araq nichor rahī haiṇ.⁴³

Her attachment to her relatives was minimal. She was afraid of God but she could never lose herself thinking about Him. Miss Charan had become more important to her than her own blood or faith. Habitually she would worship the image of Miss Charan in her mind, drowning in devotion and feelings full of love --- here comes Miss Charan --- there she goes --- there, her sari moves and blouse shimmers. [...] She would feel herself near her at all times. She's standing and Miss Charan's image has passed by her. She's sleeping and Miss Charan is stroking her. She's thirsty, her throat is parched, and Miss Charan is squeezing very cool and fragrant juices into her mouth."

The space of religious devotion is replaced with her scholarly beloved. This type of earthly love is not foreign to Urdu literary tropes, but set in the context of a girls' school, it expands the possibilities for lover and beloved. Shaman's ideas about Miss Charan blur the line between teacher's pet, friend, and romantic interest, although their relationship is based in Shaman's imagination. In expressing these fantasies, Chughtai uses this character to represent sexual desire of and between women among Indian middle-class women at the time. Ultimately, Shaman's

43 Chughtā'ī, *Ṭerhī lakīr*, 69–70.

infatuation manifests itself subconsciously, and she finds herself sleep-walking to her teacher's bedroom. After Shaman is found in her teacher's bed by the school's principal, Miss Charan is dismissed from teaching for supposedly corrupting the morals of the students. It is not clear whether Miss Charan is accused of having a sexual relationship with Shaman, or whether the simple fact that Shaman wandered into Miss Charan's room was held against her because of the significance of the bed as a site of sexuality. While Shaman's infatuation is tolerated as long as it remains purely emotional, the physicality of her body in her teacher's bed transgresses taboos against same-sex desire and against pedophilia. Young Shaman thus has to learn to cope with having the object of her infatuation wrenched away suddenly and totally.

In the novel, it takes the concerted heteronormativity of Shaman's friend Bilqīs to teach her that men should be the objects of a young girl's desire. Bilqīs would seemingly tempt Shaman by undressing in front of her and remaining undressed for hours at a time, yet chides her that there is nothing to be embarrassed about among girls,

nahāne jāne se pahle vuh kapre utār kar chīvnaṭiyon aur machharon ke kāte ke nishān apne jism par dhūndā kartī thī. agar ko'ī ā jātā to vuh khud jhīnp kar loṭ jātā. Bilqīs ko zarā bhī ihsās na hotā.
"vāh bhalā larḱiyon se kyā sharam?" [...] nahāne kā irāda kar ke vuh kapre kabhī na nikālī balki nahā kar yūṇhī liḥāf meṇ dabak jātī. jab khūb garm ho jātī aur sāre jism ke rū'eṇ sone ke tāron kī tarḥ chamak uṭhte to vuh kapre nikālī. lekan vuh ghaṇṭon faisala na kar pātī ki ūdī shalvār par kapāsī do paṭṭa ūrhe yā kāsni. vuh is bāre meṇ shaman kī rā'e leṭī. shaman bechārī gardan moṛe moṛe batā detī. usse kucch ḍarsā lagtā thā Bilqīs se, kyūnki ka'ī daf'a bāteṇ karte meṇ us kā dil be ikhtiyār us kī gardan par ungliyāṇ phīrne ko chahne lagtā.⁴⁴

Before bathing, she would take off her clothes and search her own body for bite marks from mosquitos and ants. If someone walked in, they would leave in shock. Bilqīs wouldn't care at all. "Well, what's the point of feeling ashamed in front of girls?" [...] When she planned to take a bath she would never take out clothes, rather after bathing she would wrap herself in a quilt just like that. When she felt quite warm and all of the hair on her body was glistening like golden stars, then she would take clothes out. But she wouldn't be able to decide for hours whether

44 Chughtā'ī, *Ṭerhī lakīr*, 110–111.

to match her gray *shalwar* [trouser] with a purple or yellow *dupatta* [scarf]. She would ask Shaman for her opinion on this matter. Poor Shaman would bow her head and tell her. She was a bit scared of Bilqīs, because many times, while talking to her, Shaman’s heart would long to run her fingers down Bilqīs’s neck.

The act of observing herself in the mirror for hours on end, with Shaman as an audience, is a sort of performance. Yet, Bilqīs claims it is neutralized because of sexual norms that make desire between two schoolgirls impossible. The extended performance itself, as well as Shaman’s admission of her inability to stay within these bounds by desiring to touch Bilqīs, belies these norms. Here, Bilqīs is engaged in a double act of discipline. Even while Bilqīs, as a popular girl, proudly proclaims her trysts with the boys of the neighboring school, she flaunts her desirability in front of Shaman. At the same time, she refuses to acknowledge that any desire may exist between girls. Through acts of flirtation and denial, Bilqīs moves as close as possible to the boundaries of socially approved behavior and then edges away. At the same time, Shaman learns from Bilqīs what kinds of sexual desire are appropriate and what kinds are not.

Friendships at school also provide the opportunity for Shaman to experiment at the boundaries of religious community and identity. One of her close friends, Premā, teaches her about Hinduism. Reflecting the fears of Muslim families that Islam’s prestige in the subcontinent had waned, she wrote “Spending time with Premā, she started seeing Hinduism as a very impressive religion.”⁴⁵ Shaman even applies the *kumkum* dot to her forehead in a practice of embodying the identity of a Hindu girl. The friendship formed at school drives her to move beyond the religious identity into which she was born.

The text also points to Shaman’s exposure to new literary forms and ideas. Writing of Shaman’s literary exploits, the narrator relates, “In just a few days, she read countless books.

45 *Premā ke sāth rah kar usse hindū dharam bahut muqaddas ma’lūm hone lagā thā.* Ibid., 179.

Among them, Jane Eyre impacted her a great deal. [...] After reading Tagore's stories, especially "Castaway," she would shed real tears. Hardy's famous novel *Tess* also moved her."⁴⁶ The reader is informed that the literature that she loved most was poetry by Byron, Shelley and Keats.⁴⁷ Here readers learn of an educational system that is premised upon a vast literary heritage, with cosmopolitan British literature as part and parcel of it. Perhaps inspired by this literature, she becomes infatuated with her friend Premā's widower father, and confronts him with her desires. Not understanding her own sudden boldness, Shaman ponders: "What had happened to her—how would these broken pieces be brought back together? What would happen now?"⁴⁸ The impact of literature opens up new avenues of being. Sympathizing with the protagonists of Western stories, Shaman begins to act out the romances of novels. Yet, the cultural values of European novels are not universally shared in her world, with its taboos against public expression of desire and fixed boundaries between religious communities. The juxtaposition between Western and non-Western values is at the core of the fractured modernity, the "broken pieces," of Shaman's being.

As Shaman grows older, however, she gains strength and confidence, and a world of confusing obligations and inarticulable desires becomes more malleable and at her service. After rejecting out of hand a marriage proposal from a distant relative, Shaman rejoices inwardly. This rejection has significance. She muses: "Using her strength she had slipped from every grasp. Rebellion! Her veins were full of pride. She was surprised at her own strength. She had slapped

46 *chand hī dunoṇ meṇ us ne an-ginat kitāben paṛh dāleṇ. jin meṇ se j'ain air'he usse ḥadd se ziyāda muta'ṣir kiyā. [...] tegor kī kahāniyān khūṣuṣan kāsṭ āve'paṛh kar to sach much ānsū nikal pare. hārḍī kī mashhūr nāvil ṭess ne bhī usse hilā kar rakh diyā. Ibid., 182–183.*

47 Ibid., 183.

48 *yih usse kyā ho gayā thā—yih ṭūṭe hū'e zare ab kaise jureṅge? ab kyā hogā? Ibid., 191.*

everyone in the face, broken hearts, dashed hopes into the dirt. Oh! How cruel she was!”⁴⁹ As opposed to the sanitized idea of womanhood espoused by the Muslim social reformers, Shaman’s character is reminiscent of the cruel beloved in classical Urdu and Persian poetry. Yet, rather than an object of desire, she is the subject of her own story. Notably, her confidence is also bolstered when she is elected to the student union.⁵⁰

Shaman continues to resist the imposition of a normative gender role when visiting her family. Rather than being better prepared for marriage, a now educated Shaman is disgusted by her niece Nūrī’s engagement. The text focuses on the sexual economy of marriage: “Nūrī looked to her just like a cow or bull. Exchanging her youth for [a bride-price of] ninety-one thousand rupees, she was going with a man.”⁵¹ Nūrī is not singled out for abuse; her husband is ridiculed as well for “buying her to the beat of drums. What was the difference between this transaction and the hundreds of others that take place every day on the market?”⁵² By equating marriage with a transaction in the market, Chughtai’s protagonist rejects the pomp and show of wedding celebrations. These celebrations only serve to obscure the economic and social power dynamics at play in relationships where the woman is property to be bought and remain dependent on her husband for survival.

49 *zor lagā kar us ne har girift se phisalnā shurū‘ kiya. baghāvat! us kī rag rag ghurūr se pharak uṭhī. usse khud apnī ṭāqaton par ḥairat hone lagī. us ne sab ke munh par ṭamāncha mār diyā, dil tor dī’e, ummīden khāk men milāden, ūh. kitnī zālim thī vuh?* Ibid., 208.

50 Ibid., 225.

51 *usse nūrī bi’l-kull gā’e bail kī tarah lag rahī thī. ikyāvan hazār men vuh apnī javānī kā saudā kar ke ek mard ke sāth jā rahī thī.* Ibid., 241.

52 *ḍhol tāshe se usse kharīd kar le jā rahā thā. ākhīr farq hī kyā hai us saude men aur ā’e dīn jo chā’urī men kharīd-o-farokht hotī rahtī hai.* Ibid.

Through the novel *Ṭerhī Lakīr*, the character Shaman offers readers an experience of the thrills and heartbreak that the sexual formation of young, educated women entails. *Ṭerhī Lakīr* is frequently described as closely paralleling Chughtai's own experiences growing up as a "daughter of reform." Later in her career, Chughtai would explicitly engage in the genre of autobiography and assume the role of her own protagonist in the story of the new woman.

Education against all odds in *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan* (The Robe is Made of Paper, 1979-1980)

The uproar and ensuing trial caused by the publication of the short story, "Liḥāf," coupled with the subsequent success of her film *Ziddī*, discussed in Chapter Two, garnered Chughtai a significant amount of fame. Embracing this celebrity, she fashioned for herself an authorial persona through interviews, photographs, and autobiographical essays through which Chughtai posited herself as the model of a new, autonomous self-sufficient Indian woman. Central to Chughtai's narrative of self is the transformative role of education. The remainder of this chapter explores Chughtai's presentation of the role of education in her own self-formation to argue that by positing herself as a role model, Chughtai advocated for education as a means for women to achieve autonomy.

Late in her career when she was a well-established and famous writer, Chughtai was often called upon by literary journals to reflect upon her life. Chughtai published a series of autobiographical essays under the title *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan* in 1979 and 1980. These essays were posthumously collected into a book that has been termed her autobiography. *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan* was first published serially in fourteen parts in the long-lived Urdu literary magazine, *Ājkal* (Today), by the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, from March 1979

through May 1980.¹ According to the editor of the collected pieces, Urdu scholar Vāriṣ ‘Alavī, Chughtai had wished to edit the collected manuscript herself, but she was unable to do so before she died. At the editor’s discretion, “*Ghubār-e Kārvān*” (Caravan Dust), another autobiographical essay published earlier in *Ājkal* in November 1970,¹ was added as the first chapter. Though these essays were written many years later, Chughtai writes primarily of her early life as framed through her educational experiences.

Reading autobiography presents specific challenges and opportunities for scholars. As Javed Majeed writes, composing an autobiography is “a way of enacting self-choice.” Authors can “choose their own existence from a moral and political point of view.”⁵³ While her autobiography should not be mistaken for an objective account of Chughtai’s life, it does shed light on the persona that Chughtai wanted her readers to see, to empathize with, and to consider as a possible model for their own lives.

In the text, Chughtai sketches a picture of her family for her readers. She takes great pains to describe her family as an average middle-class family from North India. Like other middle-class families in the reform period, her parents took part in the effort to educate their daughters. When Chughtai was very young, her father sent two of her elder sisters to Karāmat Husain Boarding School, a Muslim girls’ school in Lucknow, established by Sayyid Karāmat Husain (1854 – 1917), the former professor of law at Aligarh Muslim University and an educational reformer.⁵⁴ Their time at school was short-lived and they were called back. When Chughtai asked why, she was told that the rest of the family objected, stating that her parents

53 Javed Majeed, *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

54 Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 216.

would never be able to marry off their daughters.⁵⁵ Chughtai writes in detail about her keenness to study despite such obstacles, telling the reader that she would read anything she could lay her hands on. She recounts that she would keep reading all night until the lamp oil ran out; still undeterred, she would then continue to read by moonlight on the roof.⁵⁶ This trope is common among autobiographical works in South Asia and beyond, wherein subjects read by candlelight and out-study their peers.

While Chughtai's family is presented as ordinary, she posits herself as a constant rebel who struggles to express her individuality at every turn. Chughtai repeatedly emphasizes her formidable intellect even as a child. According to her autobiography, exposure to contemporary intellectual currents through publications such as *Tahzīb al-Nisvān* strengthens her desire to obtain an education. Chughtai writes that she hungered for intellectual stimulation—she would quickly devour each magazine and then run out of things to read. Discussing her frustration, she recalls:

*merī damāghī ṣiḥḥat ḍagamgāne lagī. kitāben bhī khaṭm ho ga'ī thīn [...] abā miyān kī qānūn kī kitāben parhne lagī [...] dīkshinarī dekh dekh pāgal ho jātī. is 'umr meṇ khud-kushī bahut āsān lagtī hai aur main ne bhī khud-kushī ke plan banā'e. rāt rāt bhar sochā kartī, chhat par se kūd jā'ūn tīsri manzil se sar ke bal.*⁵⁷

My mental health started getting shaky. The books had also run out. [...] I would even read my father's law books. I didn't understand any of it. Reading the dictionary over and over I went crazy. At that age, suicide seemed very easy and I even made a suicide plan. All night I used to think: 'I'll jump off the roof down three stories head first!'

55 Chughtā'ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 84.

56 Ibid., 121.

57 *mujhe apne vālidīn par ghuṣṣa nahīn raḥm ātā. vuh itne maḥdūd dā'ire meṇ qaid hai* Ibid., 122.

Here Chughtai crucially links the act of reading with life itself. Without new things to read and new ideas to explore, Chughtai presents the individual as having no outlet and consequently equates this fate with death. In spite of this, Chughtai claims that her parents were hesitant to give in to her demands to send her to school. Chughtai depicts her parents as constricted by their social standing, bound to the systems of the past. She writes, “I didn’t feel anger at my parents, rather I felt pity that they were imprisoned in such a limited circle.”⁵⁸ This was not a matter of callousness on the part of her parents towards her; “In their opinion they were saving me from the bad atmosphere of a boarding school.”⁵⁹

Chughtai presents the unequal treatment of boys and girls within her family as hypocritical. A crisis within Chughtai’s own family is credited with emboldening her to try again. Her brother Shamīm decides to quit school. Chughtai presents her readers with the bitter irony of her family fearing to lose face by sending their daughter to school, instead to lose it when their son quits. She recounts,

*kyā qiyāmat hai shamīm parhnā nahīn chāhtā aur merī parhne par pā-bandī!
shamīm ghalaṭī kar ke apnī zindagī bar-bād karne kā ḥaqq rakhtā hai. main
zindagī sudhārne kī ḥaqq-dār nahīn. kaun munṣif hai is dunyā kā? kaun merī
zindagī kā mi ‘mār hai? agar vālidīn haiñ to phir khudā ne mujhe damāgh kyūñ
diyā? main is kā kyā karūngī?*⁶⁰

It was as though doomsday had arrived! Shamīm didn’t want to study and I wasn’t allowed to study! Shamīm had the right to ruin his life. I didn’t have a right to make my life better! Who is the arbitrator of this world? Who is the architect of my life? If it’s my parents, why did God give me a brain? What should I do with it?

By bringing readers into her family politics and dramas, Chughtai provides an example of the

58 *apnī dānist meñ mujhe borḍing kī gandī faṣā se bachā rahe haiñ.* Ibid., 121.

59 Ibid., 122.

60 Ibid.

wider injustice of unequal access to education for women and girls in Indian society with all of its long-term impacts on their lives and potential. Like the paper-robed image of Ghālīb's *ghazal* that gives her autobiographical essays their title, Chughtai here complains against the injustice of the world, claiming that she needed to break out of her suffocating environment.

In the preceding examples, Chughtai performs as a demanding would-be student. As Sidone Smith and Julia Watson write in *Reading Autobiography*, “A *performative* view of life narrative theorizes autobiographical occasions as dynamic sites for the performance of identities constitutive of subjectivity. In this view, identities are not fixed or essentialized attributes of autobiographical subjects; rather they are produced and reiterated through cultural norms, and thus remain provisional and unstable.”⁶¹ *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan* should be read as an extended performance of an intellectual in the making.

In the text, Chughtai's desire for progress towards education and independence is defined against what she terms the “ideal eastern wife” (*mashriqī sughar bīvī*), that is, the model of domesticity that an earlier generation of reformers such as Maulānā Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī and others proposed as the ideal of Muslim womanhood. Using the term ironically, this “ideal eastern wife” stands in opposition to the image Chughtai projects of herself. Despite her strong-willed opposition to this “ideal”, some of the most sympathetic characters in the text desire to become such women, including her sisters and even many friends from Aligarh. What defines the eastern wife is a sense of reverence, domesticity, and a focus upon marriage and family as the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Yet Chughtai makes clear that she stands apart from those who do not challenge the expectations of the system. Chughtai enumerates the ways she differs from her older sisters. She plays the boys' games, while her sisters are skilled at Urdu, Persian, *Qur'ān*,

61 Sidone Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, n.d.), 143.

sewing, and cooking, skills which are seen as furthering the domestic ideal.⁶² In contrast to her sisters, Chughtai presents herself as longing to be a part of the world outside the home. She caricatures the way in which her mother believes that women can have an impact in the world, writing: “This is a man’s world. [...] In order to make her place in the world, a woman must use the weapons of femininity.” These included making one’s husband so uncomfortable by gratuitous service that he “falls to your feet, ashamed” (*sharmanda ho kar qadamon par gir pare*).⁶³ The ideal eastern woman should be content with her role in the household and proficient in domestic chores. She should also be resigned to reaching the outside world through the men in her life. For the “ideal eastern wife,” early education would be spent in preparation for marriage.

Chughtai presents herself as unsatisfied by the advice to use a man as her only means of self-realization. According to the text, though most women in her community are being prepared for marriage, Chughtai is evading marriage and turning the plans of her social circle on their heads. Chughtai frames her rejection of marriage in the context of systemic pressure to quell her self-reliance. She regales readers with powerful anecdotes of how she was told that she was too independent, and that any husband she married would divorce her. In response, she concludes, “Instead of pining for that which I was not destined to have, why not reject it myself? If I never even get married, will any idiot be able to divorce me? I’ll study and become independent.”⁶⁴ When asked why she does not want to get married, she answers, “I won’t be able to stand

62 Chughtā’ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 26.

63 *yih mard kī dunyā hai [...] ‘aurat ko dunyā meṇ apnā maqām paidā karne ke liye nisvānī ḥarboṇ se kām lenā partā hai.* Ibid.

64 *jo chīz merī naṣīb meṇ nahīn us ke liye tarasne kī bajā’e kyūn na usse khud hī ṭhukrā duṇ. shādī hī nahīn karuṇ to kaun aḥmaq mujhe ṭalāq degā? main parh likh kar khud mukhtār ban jā’ungī.* Ibid., 123.

listening to someone's orders. I have spent my life struggling against the oppression of my elders. I want to make my own path. The very thought of becoming a husband-worshipping ideal eastern wife makes me sick."⁶⁵ Rejecting the role of the ideal eastern wife was thus a part of her self-definition.

For Chughtai challenging the gendered order was profoundly important to self-realization, and only through exposure to the broader world could one learn to challenge norms that were systemic to society. In her autobiography, she presents her youthful self as intent to break free of virtually all the norms expected of her. One particularly symbolic rejection was that of the practice of veiling (*parda*), which, as we have discussed earlier in this chapter, stood as a symbol for the association of the woman with the house. She writes that she hated having to wear the *burqa*, which she describes as the greatest calamity ever to have occurred in her life,⁶⁶ that made her feel so degraded she felt like jumping on the tracks [and committing suicide].⁶⁷ This leads to one of her first revolts: she pretends to lose her *burqa* on the train in order to avoid wearing it. Ultimately, getting away with such a brazen action is exhilarating for her: "Only one who has tasted the intoxication of victory can live the moment I was living that day on the platform bare-faced."⁶⁸ Her brother 'Azīm Beg encouraged her to hide her *burqa* and wrote

65 *Kisī insān ke hukm kā t̄ābi 'banānā mujh se nahīn jhīlā jā'egā. main ne zindagī buzurgon ke jabar ke khilāf ihtijāj kar ke guzārī hai. mujhe apnī rāh āp banānī hai. mujhe patī vartā mashriqī sughar bīvī banne ke khiyāl se hī ghin ātī hai.* Ibid., 158.

66 *sab se barā alamiya merī jān par bīt rahā thā.* Ibid., 61.

67 *ihsās-e zillat ne mujhe ka'ī bār rail kī patrī par kaṭ jāne kī ṣalāh dī.* Ibid.

68 *magar fath kā nasha jis ne chakhā hai vuhī vuh lamhe jī saktā hai jo men us din platfārm par khule-munh jī rahī thī.* Ibid., 65.

extensively against *parda*.⁶⁹ Through this joint effort to overtake the norms of their parents, Chughtai displays the potentialities of a new generation of educated young Muslims. Yet the dispute over *parda* also brings up the question of whether her parents and family were as unbending as she portrays. Though she lost her *burqa* during this incident, she was not made to wear it again. Perhaps these families themselves were transformed along with their daughters.

In the narrative of the autobiography, the conflict within the Chughtai home comes to a climax when she demands to be sent to boarding school in Aligarh. Chughtai describes her state while she prepares to confront her parents as if she is on the verge of death. Referring to the time leading up to her confrontation with her parents, Chughtai writes: “for days I was having frightening dreams where I was dead and my family was mourning (lit. doing *mātam*).”⁷⁰ Chughtai portrays independence as a separation from her family and the constraints that family had put on her. As she evokes with her reference to vivid dreams, it is a kind of social death, one in which the homebody, “ideal eastern wife”-in-making, becomes socially illegible once she leaves the bounds of direct family oversight.

On the day she intends to confront her parents, Chughtai presents herself as first having prayed *fajr*, the early-morning prayer. Notably this is the one time in her autobiography that she mentions prayer, as though she is undertaking a sacred vow before challenging her father’s authority. This framing of herself as a religiously reverent girl softens for the reader her demand for independence and education. Chughtai writes that at the moment that she confronted her

69 In 1928, when his sister was 17, Azīm Beg Chughtā’ī published a study entitled *Qur’ān aur parda*, later followed by *Hadīs aur parda* (1933). See ‘Azīm Beg Chughtā’ī, *Majmū’a-e Mirzā ‘Azīm Beg Chughtā’ī: mazāmīn, dāstān, drāme, afsāne*, ed. Ṣalāḥuddīn Maḥmūd (Lahore: Sang-e Mīl Publications, 2008).

70 *ka’ī din se main ‘ajab darā’one khvāb dekh rahī thī. main marī paṛī hūn aur sārā ghar mātam-kunān hai. Chughtā’ī, Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 126. *Mātam* is a form of self-flagellation that symbolizes mourning, especially of the dead.

parents, her father's eyes met hers, yet she proudly maintained her gaze despite the fact that, according to her, even the most hardened criminals would have crumbled. She remembers the conversation that ensued thus:

*“maiñ paṛhne ke liye ‘Alīgarh jānā chāhtī hūñ.” maiñ ne kaha hī diyā. aur merī āvāz meñ ko’ī larzish na thī.
“paṛhtī to ho apne baṛe abā se.”
“maiñ maṭṛik kā imtiḥān denā chahṭī hūñ.”
“kis kām ā’egā. do sāl rah ga’e haiñ; jugnū ke...phir...bekār”
“maiñ maṭṛik karnā chāhtī hūñ”
“magar zārā socho. kyā fā’ida hai is se to bihtar hai tum khānā pakānā aur silā’ī va-ghaira sikhō.”⁷¹*

“I want to go to Aligarh to study.” I said it. And there was no quiver in my voice.
“You do study with your grandfather.”
“I want to take the Matric[ulation] examination.”
“What use is it? Jugnū has two years left [of schooling]...then...useless...”
“I want to take the Matric.”
“But just think. What is the benefit? It would be better for you to learn cooking and sewing and the like.”

In this conversation reconstructed from memory, Chughtai is unwavering in her stance. Her father here represents the old guard, disregarding her request and reminding her of her impending marital responsibilities and her lack of feminine skills. While Chughtai's father protests that school would be useless for her—worse, that it will hurt her prospects of getting married—Chughtai refuses to give in. She is unwavering in rejecting the import of a domestic education to help her realize her aspirations. Nothing, neither propriety nor parental injunction, can suppress her desire for an education.

In the text, she is continually demanding, claiming that she'll leave on her own. Her father responds:

*“bas yūñ hī chal dogī?”
“hāñ. ghar se nikal kar tānga lungī. vuhāñ se isṭeshan jā gar kisī bhī ḍabba meñ*

71 Ibid., 126–127.

baiṭh jā'ungī.”

“phir?”

*“kisī bhī iṣṭeshan par utar kar mishin iskūl kā pata pūchhtī pahunch jā'ungī.
vuhān 'īsā'ī ho jā'ungī. vuhān mujhe jitnā chāhūngī parhne kā mauqa 'milegā’”*⁷²

“You’ll just leave?”

“Yes. After leaving home, I’ll take a carriage. From there I’ll go to the train station and sit in any one of the railcars.”

“Then?”

“I’ll get off at any one of the stations and ask about the location of the nearest mission school and go there. I’ll become Christian. I’ll have the opportunity to study as much as I want there.”

In an almost playful back and forth, Chughtai craftily threatens her father with something that would make him lose more face than a failed marriage—conversion. Here, the contrast between praying *fajr* prior to her encounter with the threat of an abandonment of Islam altogether underscores Chughtai’s utilitarian attitude toward religion. In this constructed autobiographical text, religious idioms, rituals and even identity are useful, whether for calming the mind or convincing one’s parents to provide greater freedom. Though her parents are her only source of financial support, Chughtai depicts herself as willing to sacrifice everything for the opportunity to pursue an education. Though she started her morning with the Muslim *fajr* prayer, Chughtai is willing to threaten a conversion to Christianity if it means she can attend school. At the end of the day, it is the expression of her individuality that matters most, not her familial or her religious affiliations.

One noteworthy aspect of the debate on women’s education is the perception of the relative danger of a woman’s ability to write as opposed to her ability to read. Reformers held that the role of a woman was to be a passive recipient of knowledge rather than an active producer of it. That is to say, it would be a greater danger for women to speak for themselves

72 Ibid., 127.

rather than to serve as the audience for speech. In some circles, even if women were taught to read, teaching women to write was frowned upon. While in previous centuries, women of the Mughal nobility patronized scholars, composed poetry, and wrote mystical treatises,⁷³ during the nineteenth century, Minault writes, “For a woman to know how to write could be dangerous.”⁷⁴ One of the reasons for this was that “the anxiety that if a girl knew how to write, she might write letters to forbidden persons,”⁷⁵ thus violating the system of seclusion. Much more significant than simply having the power to overcome these taboos of communication, for Chughtai, writing provided her the opportunity to demand subjectivity for herself and other women.

Marriage is a perpetually looming threat to individuality in *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*. Chughtai writes that she desperately wanted to ensure that her parents refused a marriage proposal sent to the family for her, since she was concerned that marriage would put an end to her educational aspirations. But Chughtai presents herself as far from being a passive subject of her parents’ whims. In order to protest the proposal, she first writes a letter to her brother, but he is not sympathetic. Next, she reaches out to her childhood playmate and cousin, Athar Husain Usmānī, nicknamed Jugnū, imploring him to send a counter-proposal: “I swear to God I will not force you to marry me. Only you can stop my wedding. Write to our uncle that you want to marry me. [...] If you don’t help me you will regret it.”⁷⁶ In spite of not receiving a direct reply,

73 See, for instance, Bokhari, *Imperial Women in Mughal India: The Piety and Patronage of Jahanara Begum*.

74 Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 23.

75 *khudā qasam tum se shādī ke liye zabardastī nahīn karūngī. merī shādī sirf tum rukvā sakte ho. māmūn ko likho ki tum mujh se shādī karnā chāhte ho. [...] agar tum ne merī madad na kī to afsos hogā tumhen*. Ibid., 24.

76 Chughtai, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 123. Ismat Chughtai, *A Life in Words: Memoirs*, trans. M. Asaduddin (New Delhi: Viking, 2012), 112.

her cousin does as he is instructed. Having grown up together, they knew each other well and such cousin-marriages were not uncommon among her social circles. Thus it is a convincing ruse, though the reader never learns of Jugnū's thoughts on the matter.

Later, when her parents would not allow her to stay in the boarding house after the family leaves Aligarh, Chughtai recalls that she wrote again to Jugnū and told him that he should demand she be educated, threatening that otherwise he would call off the wedding.⁷⁷ Her strategy proves successful and her parents allow her to continue her studies, despite the fact that she does not follow through in marrying Jugnū. Playing on her parents' fears of an unwedded daughter, Chughtai points to her ability to use parental anxieties about marriage to achieve her goals of liberation. Notably, this is much like her mother's strategy, in that it could be seen as manipulation carried out by one who is relatively powerless against those with more power. That she rejects her mother's approach but then essentially deploys it herself certainly complicates Chughtai's presentation of her own character.

Chughtai writes that her efforts to convince and threaten her parents to allow her to attend school worked and eventually they acquiesced. The transition in their behavior towards her is striking, yet once again calls into question the narrative of the degree to which they were opposed to her education,

bevuqūf aisī ulṭī-sīdhī bāteṇ sochnā bhī nahīn chāhi 'e. hamēn nahīn ma 'lūm thā tumheṇ paṛhne kā itnā shauq hai. tum Nanhe aur Shaukat ke sāth rah saktī ho. " phir unhoṇ ne mujhe ek kitāb dī. yih pās-buk hai apne dastkhatt se tum post āfis se rupiya nikalvā saktī ho. is meṇ chhi hazār rūpiye haiṇ ise tum jahīz samjho yā apnā ḥaqq. ham tumhārī zimma-dārī se dast-burdār hote haiṇ. kitāb le kar main sakta meṇ rah ga 'ī. is ke 'alāva Āgra kā ek makān ham ne tumhāre nām kar diyā hai. chāho ise becho yā kirā 'e par uṭhā 'o, tum jāno. unhoṇ ne mujhe makān ke kāghazāt thamā diye.

77 Chughtā'ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 131.

*ek dam main phūt phūt kar rone lagī. jaise nā 'u men baṭhā kar patvār hāth men de kar mānjhī mujhe akelā chor gayā ho.*⁷⁸

“Senseless fool. You shouldn’t even think such upside-down things. We didn’t know you had such an interest in studying. You can stay with Nanhe and Shaukat [her brother and sister-in-law],” Then he handed me a booklet.

“This is a passbook, with your signature you can withdraw money from the post office. There are six thousand rupees in the account. Consider this your dowry or inheritance. We are now free from responsibility for you.”

I took the booklet, stunned.

“Besides this, we have also put a house in Agra in your name. Sell it if you want or rent it, you know best.” He handed me the papers of the house.

All of the sudden I began to cry uncontrollably. It was as if, after seating me in a boat and handing me the oars, the boatman left me all alone.

In the text, her freedom does not come without a price. It is tinged with rejection by her father’s statement that he is giving her a share of inheritance while still alive. By providing the economic support that would make her an independent economic actor, they do in fact ultimately support her aims.

Educated Subjectivity

At Aligarh, Chughtai depicts herself as caught up in the intellectual excitement of the city during the founding moments of the Progressive Writers’ Movement. As discussed earlier, Rashīd Jahān, the daughter of Aligarh Girls’ School’s founders, Shaikh ‘Abdullāh and Wahīd Jahān Begam, had published two short fiction pieces in the *Angāre* collection. When *Angāre* was published, a cleric teaching at Aligarh University by the name of Aḥrārī started writing against the girls’ school as a sinful hotbed of obscenity. According to Chughtai:

us ne kahā girlz kālij ranḍī-khāna hai usse fauran band kar diyā jā’e. aur Rashīda Āpā aur dusre likhne vāloṅ ke gande gande kārtūn nikāle. main ne vuh kitāb nahīn parhī thī, lekan Aḥrāravī [sic] ne dil men us kitāb ko parhne kī lagan paidā kar dī. na jāne kahān se vuh kitāb borḍing men kisī de-

78 Ibid.

*iskālar ne lā dī aur rāton rāt lā 'īṭen jalā kar raushanī na dikhā 'ī de is liye shīshon
par riṣā 'yān laṭkā kar ham ne vuh kitāb parhī. aur hil ga 'e.
magar parh kar tazabzūb men par ga 'e. 'uryāniyat aur gandagī bahut talāsh kī
magar palle na parī.*

He said that the girls' school was a brothel and that it should be closed immediately. Also, he published dirty cartoons of Rashīda Āpā and the other writers. I hadn't read the book, but Ahrāravī [sic] created a desire in my heart to read it. A day scholar brought the book to the boarding house from who knows where. In the middle of the night we read the book, lighting lanterns and hanging blankets over our windows in order to make sure the light didn't show. We were moved. After reading it, we were also thrown into confusion. We looked for obscenity and dirtiness but didn't find any.

Despite not finding anything she thought to be obscene in the text, she recounts that she told the other girls: "This book is extremely dirty. My hands, head and mind have all gone rotten. Let's go ask for forgivingness in the prayer hall. God must have found this book very hard to swallow!"⁷⁹ When chastised by others for making a joke, she continues in her mocking tone, "What idiot is making a joke? If respectable people say it's dirty they must not be lying."⁸⁰ In this representation of a schoolgirl dialogue, Chughtai mimics the role of morality police and mocks a condemnation of *Angāre* as obscene. In light of her own obscenity trial described in Chapter Two, where many "respectable" people objected to Chughtai's writing, this is particularly comical. The talk of praying and her body rotting from contact with the text is again tongue in cheek. Chughtai depicts this pivotal moment that influenced her later career as electric, and she vividly describes reading the text after-hours in the dormitory. The possibility of obtaining ostensibly banned books also highlights the opportunities afforded girls in their new

79 *kitāb be-intihā gandī hai merī to hāth sar gayā damāgh sar gayā. chalo namāz ke kamre men tauba karen. allāh se ma 'āfi māngen. allāh ko yih kitāb bahut nā-guvār guzarī hogī. Ibid., 162.*

80 *mazāq kaun nā-ma 'qūl banā rahā hai. sharīf log kahtī haiṅ gandī hai to jhūṭ to na bolte honge. Ibid.*

environment. At issue here is the definition of “obscene.” What counts as obscene changes depending on the reader. Aḥrārī and other detractors objected to the text because it gave the opportunity for readers to make a different evaluation of the limits of propriety in literature.

As one might expect from the protagonist of her story, Chughtai writes that she took a leading role in defending Rashīd Jahān and her school from attack by enlisting allies from the broader university:

angāre parḥ kar Mullā Aḥrāravī [sic] kā chūthṛā parḥā to jī khūb jalā aur main ne ek mazmūn likhā. [...] musulmān laṛkiyāṇ pahlī hī mahrūm aur pichḥarī ho ’ī haiṇ ūpar se kaṭṭar Mullā Aḥrārī jān kā dushman ho rahā hai. kālij band kar diyā jā ’e magar ham sārī laṛkiyōṇ kī yihāṇ se bas lāsheṇ hī jā ’engī. kaun band karne ā ’egā. ham us se napaṭ leṅge aur yūnīvarsitī meṇ hamāre cha hazār bhā ’ī haiṇ. kyā vuh khāmoshī se hamārī lāshōṇ ko kachaltā dekhenge. jab bhī hamēṇ mullā Aḥrārī kā kḥiyāl ātā hai ham apne cha hazār bhā ’iyōṇ, buzurg profesarōṇ, fīcharōṇ ko yād kar lete haiṇ. tab hamārī himmateṇ barḥ jātī haiṇ. jab tak vuh salāmat haiṇ ko ’i mā ’ī kā lāl hamārā bāl bīkā nahīṇ saktā. Jhānsī kī rānī ne shahanshāh Humāyūṇ ko rākhī bhejī thī. ham kālij kī tamām laṛkiyāṇ apne hazārōṇ bhā ’iyōṇ kī khidmat meṇ nek khvāhishāt ke sāth iḥtirām aur khulūṣ kī rākhī bhejte haiṇ. hamēṇ ummed hai ki vuh hamārī rakhvālī ke liye ko ’ī qadam uṭhā ’enge.⁸¹

After reading *Angāre*, I read Aḥrāravī’s [sic] rag and my spirit burned so I wrote an article [...] I said, “To begin with, Muslim girls are deprived and backwards. On top of that, the raving Mullā Aḥrārī is making himself our mortal enemy. Let the college be closed, but only our dead bodies will leave from here. Who is going to come close it? We will deal with him and we also have our six thousand brothers in the university. Will they quietly watch our corpses being trampled upon? Whenever we think of Mullā Aḥrārī, we remember our six thousand brothers, honored professors, and teachers. Then we feel emboldened. As long as they are hale and hearty, no mother’s child can touch a hair on our heads. The queen of Jhansi sent a *rakhi*⁸² to Emperor Humāyūn. All of us girls at the college are sending our good wishes and *rākhīs* of respect and friendship in honor of our thousands of brothers. We have hope that they will take some steps for our protection.”

81 Ibid., 163–164.

82 A thread bracelet given by a sister to her brother, or by a woman to a male friend, expressing the love and duty of a sibling relationship.

Here Chughtai casts her struggle together with historical epic struggles against tyranny, marking the occasion as one of historical importance. In fact, Chughtai's refers to two distinct historical events. She likens the students of her school to the Queen of Jhansi (1835 – 1858), a figure who is remembered as a symbol of resistance to imperialism during the Rebellion of 1857 against the rule of the East India Company.⁸³ She also equates the event of reaching out to the boys' school for support to the legend of the queen who sent a *rākhī* to the Mughal Emperor Humāyūn (1508 – 1556), an event typically associated with Queen Kaṇvaṭī of Chittorgaṛh. Though the two figures historically are separated by three centuries, Chughtai combines the two characters in an evocative manner aimed at forming alliances and recruiting others to their cause.

The strategy is presented as working quite well:

*main ne mazmūn jo ṭavīl aur jazbātī thā laṛkiyon ko sunāyā. ek hullar mach gayā. pāpā miyān ko khabar pahunchī vuh ā'e aur sunā. usī vaqt lifāfa mangvā kar 'Alī Garh Gazit ko bhej diyā. dūsre dīn mazmūn chhap gayā. laṛkon ne vuh mazmūn parhā aur usī rāt jā kar mullā Aḥrārī kī khūb ṭhakā'ī kī. daftar toṛ phoṛ dālā. kisī ko us kī ḥimāyat kī himmat na paṛī. un laṛkon kī rishta-dār laṛkiyān kālij meṇ parṭī thī un ke zarī'a laṛkiyon kā shukriya pahuncā diyā gayā. us ke ba'd mullā ghā'ib ho gayā.*⁸⁴

I read out the article to the girls, which was long and emotional. There was a great commotion. Papa Miyān heard the news. He came and listened. Immediately he requested an envelope and sent to the *Aligarh Gazette*. The essay was published the next day. The boys read the article, and that night beat Mullā Aḥrārī and destroyed his office. No one had the courage to help him. Those boys had girls from their families studying at the [women's] college and our thanks were conveyed through them. After that, the mullā disappeared.

83 The Queen of Jhansi had become a symbol of the Indian freedom struggle. As Harleen Singh writes, “in India, tales of the warrior queen remain emblematic of the anti-colonial struggle, which celebrates her as a harbinger of freedom.” *The Rani of Jhansi*, 2. By likening themselves to the Rani against the broader context of the Indian Independence movement, the girls' campaign against Aḥrārī recreated in microcosm the freedom struggle that was taking place across the subcontinent.

84 Chughtā'ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 164.

Chughtai does not express any sympathy for expelled and beaten Aḥrārī and illustrates here that it is acceptable to exploit familial bonds, notions of honor, and the anger of men when necessary.

In fact, the defeat of Aḥrārī is a cause of great celebration for the girls, affirming that they are considered an important part of Aligarh University. In their celebrations after the disappearance of Aḥrārī, the girls of the school hold a fancy dress party. Each girl dresses as a contemporary male Urdu poet in a mock poetic gathering (*mushā'ira*). The male homosocial space of the *mushā'ira*, is taken over by the “daughters of reform.”

*apnī is fath par borḍing meṇ khūb jashan manāyā gayā. khūb ulṭe-sīdhe gāne gā'e aur tennis kort par Khurshīd 'Abdullāh ne dāns liyā. kālij se sherwāniyān mangvā kar mashhūr shā'iron kā bhes badal kar un kā kalām parhā gayā. Khurshīd Jahān jo bhārī bhar kam aur gorī thī Josh Malīḥābādī banī. Mishā jo khūb sānvīlī thī chamakdār safed dānt the dārhī lagā kar Jigar Murādābādī banī. Ṣafiya Sirāj Majāz kī bahin to apne bhā'ī ke kapre le ā'ī vuh jab majāz banī to sab kī chīkheṇ nikal ga'eṇ. Fākhira Sāghir Nizāmī banī. be-ḥadd dīlchasp mushā'ira rahā. Khātūn āpā ne dusre dīn kī chhuṭī kā i'lān kiyā. tennis kort khāṣā raqṣ-gāh ban gayā.*⁸⁵

Upon this victory, a huge party was celebrated in the dormitory. We sang lots of silly songs and Khurshīd 'Abdullāh danced on the tennis court. We requested *sherwānis*⁸⁶ from the men's college, dressed ourselves as famous poets and recited their verses. Khurshīd Jahān, who was bulky and fair, became Josh Malīḥābādī.⁸⁷ Mishā, who had dark with sparkling white teeth, put on a beard and became Jigar Murādābādī.⁸⁸ Ṣafiya Sirāj was Majāz's⁸⁹ sister, so she brought her

85 Ibid.

86 A long suit-coat like garment worn by men in South Asia.

87 Josh Malīḥābādī (1898 – 1982), still a young, rising star at the time of the publication of *Angāre*, was one of the most prolific Urdu poets of the twentieth century. He wrote an autobiography entitled *Yādoṇ kī barāt* (Karachi: Josh Academy, 1970). On his autobiography, see Hilāl Naqvī, *Yādoṇ kī barāt kā qalamī nuskhā aur us ke gumshuda va gḥair-maṭbū'a aurāq: ek taḥqīqī daryāft* (Calgary: Josh Literary Society, 2013).

88 Jigar Murādābādī (1890 – 1960), a North Indian Urdu poet, was renowned as a master of the classical *ghazal*. On his life see Tabassum Nizāmī, *Jigar Murādābādī: ḥālāt, intikḥāb-e kalām tabṣira* (Hyderabad: Nafis Academy, 1947).

89 The poet Majāz Lakḥnavī (1911 – 1955) studied at Aligarh University, where he composed its anthem, *yah merā chaman hai merā chaman / main apne chaman ke bulbul*

brother's clothes. When she played Majāz, everyone screamed. Fākhira played Sāghir Nizāmī.⁹⁰ It was an exceedingly interesting *mushā'ira*. Khātūn Apa announced a holiday the next day. The tennis court became a huge dance floor.

The symbolic becoming of male poets is a productive site to explore the meaning of gender for Chughtai and the context in which she lived and went to school. Taking on the guise of men, particularly famous male poets, is a performative move. Embodying the identity of the man of letters is connected to intellectual and cultural capital. In this self-narrative, Chughtai builds herself up as destined for a career in literature. By recounting the power of her published word she emphasizes her significance as an intellectual subject.

At the end of the celebrations, the girls hold a mock funeral for Mullā Ahrārī, signifying the symbolic death of the patriarchal system and the beginning of a new age: “Mullā Ahrārī's funeral procession was paraded around the entire hostel. At the center of the courtyard, his effigy was burned; peanuts were roasted in the flame and eaten. The intoxication of this victory stayed for months. [...] This was our own victory.”⁹¹ By vicariously taking the reader of her autobiography through the process of this victory over the likes of Mullā Ahrārī, Chughtai has brought the reader into the very process of education and ultimately rebellion she and her

hūn (“This is my meadow, my meadow / I am the nightingale of my meadow.”) Majāz was editor of the Aligarh University Magazine. Incidentally, his sister Šafiya later married the poet Nišār Jān Akhtar and was the mother of the poet and lyricist Jāved Akhtar. On Majāz and Šafiya, see Ḥamīda Sālim, *Ham sāth the: Asrārulḥaq Majāz, Anšārulḥaq Harvānī aur Šafiya Jān Nišār Akhtar* (New Delhi: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1999).

90 Sāghar Nizāmī (1905 – 1983) was another prolific *ghazal* writer and publisher. His correspondence with other literary figures is published by Fīroz Muẓaffar, ed., *Maktūbāt-e Sāghar Nizāmī* (New Delhi: Modern Publishing House, 2001).

91 *Mullā Ahrārī kā janāza sāre bordīng meṇ ghamāyā gayā. bīch šaḥn meṇ chatā jalā'ī ga'ī jis kī āg meṇ mūng phaliyān bhūn bhūn kar khā'ī ga'eṇ. mahīnoṇ is fāth kā nasha savār rahā [...] yih hamārī apnī jūt thī. Chughtā'ī, Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 164.

classmates experience.

Chughtai became very close to Shaikh ‘Abdullāh and his wife, the parents of Rashīd Jahān, who in addition to founding Aligarh Girl’s College itself, also founded the women’s magazine *Khātūn* (*Lady*).⁹² After spending her childhood reading women’s magazines like *Khātūn*, being able to witness the publishing process close-up influenced Chughtai’s decision to enter into a career of writing. At Aligarh Girls’ School, the curriculum incorporated the Muslim reformist curriculum such as reading and writing Urdu, mathematics, embroidery, and cooking. But girls at Aligarh also learned English and studied texts according to the European model.⁹³ Chughtai became a participant in both the pedagogical and the print networks of women’s education. The close and personal connection with the family of Rashīd Jahān played a profound role in shaping Chughtai’s intellectual network.

This story of becoming a modern Indian woman ultimately leads her to pursue education beyond institutions set up specifically for the Muslim community. After completing boarding school, Chughtai wrote that her hunger to pursue education continued, and she went to Lucknow to pursue her Bachelor of Arts degree. Of her years pursuing a BA at Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, she wrote: “The two years I spent in Lucknow turned out to be very important in my life. My mind found new avenues; new doors opened.”⁹⁴ Education is presented as a process of powerful, constant self-realization. It was a life-stage that saw her form lifelong relationships with writers and ideas, but also with young women from backgrounds like hers who were

92 Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 110.

93 Gail Minault, “Shaikh Abdullah, Begam Abdullah and Sharif Education for Girls at Aligarh,” in *Modernization and Change among Muslims in India*, ed. Imtiaz Ahmed (Delhi: Manohar, 1982), 210–229.

94 *na’e na’e darvāze aur khirkiyān damāgh men khul rahī thīn*. Chughtā’ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 165.

benefiting from this type of education for the first time.

At Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, Chughtai studied politics and contemporary literature from around the world. She writes that her favorite teacher, Dr. Tucker, had retired from the American and European university systems to teach in India. In the text, Chughtai relates that the study of literature is not just about learning facts—rather, it could create a visceral and emotional experience. Throughout her education, Chughtai comes to appreciate the power of the literary to effect emotive response. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is through literature that Chughtai connects to cosmopolitan demands for human dignity and respect, irrespective of the context or cultural background.

‘Alī Garh meñ Khātūn Āpā inglish kī bihtarīn ustād mānī jātī thīñ aur un ke parhā’e hu’e sabaq damāgh kā ek ḥiṣa ban jāte the. magar jab khātūn āpā kī ustād Dākṭar Ṭakkar se vāsṭa parā to ma ‘lūm hu’ā ‘ilm kā ek samundar hai ki umḍā chalā ātā hai. mujhe vuh dīn hamesha yād rahegā jab unhoñ ne Vardsvarth kī naẓm “Little Match Girl” aur “We are Seven.” kilās meñ parhāyā to pahle sunānā phir siskiyan aur phir bhaun bhaun shurū ho ga’ī. khud Dākṭar Ṭakkar kā munh surkh angāra ho rahā thā aur chiyāñ sī nīlī ānkheñ bhar ā’ī thīñ, vuh khud itnī ḍūb kar parhtī thīñ ki būrhe hath pair larazne lagte the.’⁹⁵

At Aligarh, Khātūn Āpā was thought to be the best English teacher and the lessons she taught became an integral part of our minds. But when we met Khātūn Āpā’s teacher Dr. Tucker, we learned that knowledge is an overflowing ocean. I will always remember the day when she taught us Wordsworth’s poems ‘Little Match Girl’ and ‘We Are Seven.’ First there was silence, then sniffing and eventually all out crying. Dr. Tucker own face was becoming a red ember and her pale blue, tamarind seed-shaped eyes were full of tears. She would herself get so engrossed while reading that her old hands and feet would begin to shake.

While Chughtai’s writing was rooted in the Urdu literary tradition, she describes her readings in world literature at Isabella Thoburn College, providing her readers with a virtual syllabus in the process, “In prose, I started with the Bronte sisters and then read all the Russian writers, especially Chekhov, Tolstoy, Gorky, Dostoyevsky. Then I read Charles Dickens, Émile Zola,

95 Ibid., 263.

Balzac, Maugham and Hemingway.”⁹⁶ For Chughtai, the realism of Russian authors, especially that of Gorky, would become a major influence in her writing, and she spoke of the influence of Russian literature frequently in her interviews. The authors Chughtai took as influences were themselves involved in deep social critique around gender, religion and education.

At the moving conclusion to her *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, Chughtai describes one of the rituals of the graduation ceremony from Isabella Thoburn College:

sāl ke khātima par jab bī e sīnyar kī lar̥kiyon ko alvidā ‘ī dīnar diyā gayā [...] hāl kā sārā farnīchar dīvāron se lagā diyā gayā. bīch meṇ rukhṣat hone vālī lar̥kiyān ek ḥalqe meṇ kharī hū ‘īn aur jin kā ākhirī sāl thā vuh un ke pīchhe kharī hū ‘īn. aglī qatār kī lar̥kiyon ke hāth meṇ miṭī kī hāndiyon kī rang ba-rangī qandīlen thīn jin meṇ chirāgh raushan the. kālij ke gānon ke ba ‘d ākhirī rasm meṇ sīnyar lar̥kiyon ne vuh qandīlen jūniyar lar̥kiyon ko sonp den. ‘yih ‘ilm kī sham ‘ jo hamain hamārī sīnyar bahinon ne thamā ‘ī thī ham tumhen sonpte hain. ‘yih bujhne na pā ‘e.’
*be ikhtiyār lar̥kiyān phūṭ kar ro parīn. profesiron kī ānkhen bhī nam ho ga ‘īn. un qandīlon kī raushnī āj tak damāgh meṇ mahfūz hai.*⁹⁷

At the end of the year, when there was a farewell dinner for the BA senior girls [...] all the furniture in the hall was moved to the walls. In the middle of the room the graduating girls stood in a circle. Around them stood the girls one year junior to them. In the hands of the girls of the first circle were candlesticks with colorful lighted candles. After singing the college songs, the last ritual was when the senior girls handed those candles to their juniors.

“This light of knowledge that our senior sisters passed to us, we now entrust to you.”

“It cannot be extinguished.”

All the girls started crying uncontrollably. The professors had tears in their eyes. The light of those candles still remains safely in my mind.

These “daughters of reform” created education-based relationships that would guide them into the future. Just as the girls at the college mark the passing of knowledge between generations, so

96 *naṣr meṇ Brā ‘unī Sisters se shurū ‘ kar ke tamam rūsī adīb khāṣ taur par Chekhov, Tālstā ‘ī, Gorkī, Dostovskī phir Chārals Dīkins Emīlī Zolā, Bālzāk, Mām, Hemingway ko bhī parhā. Ibid., 276.*

97 *Ibid., 288.*

too Chughtai marks her relationship with her readers. The educational experience was at the very core of Chughtai's representation of self. In the retrospective gaze of telling her life's story, Chughtai focused on her accomplishments as a woman whose life was shaped by the changing educational system.

Conclusion

Uncertain of how to make sense of a new colonial order, Muslim leaders looked for reasons behind the community's sudden loss of power in India. One of the main goals of Muslim social reformers was the reform of women, particularly through education. However, the perspective of these reformers was for the most part that of powerful men, and the ultimate purpose of women's education was to produce a competent wife and mother.

Though such might have been the ideals of educational reformers, Chughtai made clear that notions of *sharāfat* (respectability) were too limited to encompass the experiences of this first generation of schoolgirls. For Chughtai, education was an opportunity to discover and enrich the self for its own sake, not for the sake of one's family and reputation. In *Terhī Lakīr*, Chughtai described the struggles of the twentieth-century Indian Muslim girl, who struggles to maintain her own sense of autonomy through the constant disciplining of her emotions in the school environment. In her autobiographical essays, Chughtai becomes her own story's protagonist, as she expresses a sense of pleasure and belonging in the educational institutions she attended and provides an idealized model for other readers of similar backgrounds. While the newly created schools for Muslim girls made possible her growth and development as an intellectual, the course taken by Chughtai and the others of the *Angāre* generation was something which the reformers had not predicted. By the time she published her autobiography, Indian

Reform, Education, and Woman as Subject

Muslims women had their horizon of life possibilities expand to include professional and artistic fields. In her self-fashioning in the text of her autobiographical essays, it is her constant hunger for knowledge and her experiences in fighting for her right to an education that shapes her into a formidable intellectual, one who is not afraid to court controversy and use her pen to advocate for justice.

Chapter Four

The Many Lives of Urdu: Language, Progressive Literature and Nostalgia

During the 1960s and 1970s, the National Book Trust of India (est. 1957) began a large-scale translation project to produce representative anthologies of India's many literatures into other Indian languages in a series called *Kathābhāratī* (Stories of India). Chughtai's work was selected alongside that of Progressive writers Krishan Chandar and Rajinder Singh Bedi as representative of contemporary Urdu literature. Notably, the writers selected had remained in India after Partition, and Chughtai was the only one of the three from a Muslim background. Her stories "Ek Zārā sī Bāt" (A Minor Issue), "Chauthī kā Joṛā" (The Wedding Dress), "Amar Bel" (The Immortal Vine), "Do Hāth" (A Pair of Hands), and "Baccho Phupī" (Aunt Bacchu) were made available in languages including Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati, and Bengali.¹ In the images below of "Do Hāth" translated into Gujarati and Bengali, we see a visual representation of the diverse languages and scripts, and thus also audiences, that are able to access this story. This image also presents a material product created through state patronage of Chughtai's work (Figure 4.1). Through such translation efforts, Chughtai's stories have become a part of the Indian literature curriculum throughout the country.²

1 See Lakshmikant Varma, ed., *Kathābhāratī: Urdū Kahāniyān*, (in Hindi) (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1972); Mihar Singh Randhwa, ed., *Kathābhāratī: Urdū Kahāniyān*, (in Punjabi) (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1972); Jyotish Jani, ed., *Kathābhāratī: Urdū Vartāo*, (in Gujarati) (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1975); Arunkumar Mukhopadya, ed., *Urdū Galpa Saṅkalan*, (in Bengali) (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1975).

2 For instance, through personal communication with professors at S.N.D.T. Women's University in Mumbai, I am told that Chughtai continues to be read widely throughout Maharashtra as part of the B.A. English curriculum.

બે હાથ

જૂંઠે હાથ

ઈસ્મત ચુગતાઈ

રામઅઘતાર વૃક્ષકેત્ર થેકે ફિરે આસહિલ। વૃદ્ધિ મેથરાનીં ટિઠિ પડિયે નેવાર જગ્ગ આવા મિઠ્ઠાંર કાહે એસેહિલ। રામઅઘતારેર ‘હૂટિ’ હયે ગેહે। વૃક્ષ શેષ હયે ગિયેહિલ તો! એઈ કારણે તિન વહર વાદે રામઅઘતાર ફિરે આસહિલ। વૃદ્ધિ મેથરાનીંર ઠામડા-ચૂલે-પડાં ટોથે અશ્રુ દેથાં દિયેહિલ। કૃતજ્ઞતાવશતઃ સે દોઢ-દોઢે સકલેર ઠરણ હૂંયેહિલ યેન એઈ સવ ઠરણેર માલિકેરાઈ તાર એકમાત્ર પૂત્રકે વૃક્ષકેત્ર થેકે જીવિત સુસ્થ અવસ્થાય ફેરત એનેહિલ।

વૃદ્ધિર વયસ પઠ્ઠાશ વહર હવે કિશ્ત તાકે સત્તર વહરેર મતો દેથાય। દર્શ-વારોટા હોટ-વડ હેલેર જન્મ દિયેહિલ। તાદેર મધ્યે કેવલ રામઅઘતારેઈ અનેક માનત-ટાનત કરાર ફલે રૈંઠે હિલ। તાર વિયે દેવાર એક વહર પુરા હય નિ, રામઅઘતારેર ‘ઢાક’ એસે ગિયેહિલ। મેથરાનીં અનેક રામેલા કરેહિલ કિશ્ત કોનો ફલ હય નિ। કિશ્ત યથન રામઅઘતાર ઉર્દીં પરે શેષવારેર મતો તાર ઠરણ સ્પર્શ કરતે એસેહિલ, તથન તાર દાપટ દેથે વૃદ્ધિર ધુવ દાપટ હયેહિલ, યેન તાર હેલે કર્નેલેઈ હયે ગિયેહે।

પિછનેર મહલે ઠાકર-વાકરરા મુઠકિ હાસિ હેસેહિલ। રામઅઘતાર ફિરે આસાર પર યે ડામ હવાર આશા હિલ, સવાઈ તાર સમ્પર્કે ઉત્સુક હયે વસેહિલ। યદિઘ રામઅઘતાર વૃક્ષકેત્રે કામાન-વન્દુક હૂંડતે થાય નિ, તથાપિ સિપાહીદેર પાયથાના સાફ કરતે કરતે તાર મધ્યે કિહૂટા સિપાહિયાના રોચાવ આર ઠાંટ દેથાં ગિયેહિલ। ધુસર ઉર્દીં પરે સેઈ પુરનો રામઅઘતાર તો આર સેઈ લોક હિલ ના। એટા અસંજ્ઞવ યે સે ગોરૂંર કાર્યકલાપ ટૂંપઠાપ ગુનવે આર તાર તરતાજા થુન વદનામીર ઉપર થેપે ના ઉઠવે।

રામૌતાર મોરચેથી પાછો કરી રહ્યો હતો. વૃદ્ધા ભંગિયણ મારા અબ્બામિયાં પાસે કાગળ વંચાવવા આવી હતી. લડાઈ પૂરી થઈ ચૂકી હતી એટલે રામૌતારને રજા મળી ગઈ અને એ હવે પાછો આવતો હતો. આ સમાચાર જાણીને વૃદ્ધા ભંગિયણની આંખમા ઝળઝળિયાં આવી ગયાં. કૃતજ્ઞતાના ભાવથી એ વૃદ્ધા ચારે બાજુ દોડતી, સૌને પગે પડતી, ઝૂકી ઝૂકીને સલામો ભરતી હતી. કેમ જાણે એ બધાએ જ એના એકના એક માત્ર પુત્રને લડાઈમાંથી સહીસલામત પાછો આણ્યો ન હોય !

વૃદ્ધાની ઉંમર તો પચાસની હશે પણ દેખાવ પરથી એ સિત્તેરની જણાતી હતી. દસબાર કાર્યાપાકાં બાળકોને એણે જન્મ આપ્યો, તેમાંથી ફક્ત એક રામૌતાર અનેક માનતાઓ માન્યા પછી માંડ બચી ગયો હતો. રામૌતારની શાદી થયે માંડ એક વર્ષ પણ પૂરું થયું નહોતું ત્યાં તો એને જંગ પર બોલાવતું લશ્કરી તેડું આવી પહોંચ્યું હતું. બુદ્ધી ભંગિયણે ખૂબ ધાંધલ મચાવ્યું પણ એનું ચાલે શું ? પણ જ્યારે એનો પુત્ર વિદાય વેળાએ લશ્કરી વરદી પહેરીને પોતાની માને ચરણસ્પર્શ કરવા આવ્યો ત્યારે એની શાન અને એની શૌકત જોઈને બુદ્ધી ભંગિયણની છાતી ગજ ગજ ફૂલી ગઈ. જાણે એનો છોકરો લશ્કરનો મોટો કર્નલ બની ગયો હોય એવા ગર્વનો એણે અનુભવ કર્યો.

શાગિર્દ પેશા (નોકરોને રહેવાની ચાલ) માં નોકરોના મુખ પર મશ્કરીભર્યું હાસ્ય ફરકતું હતું. રામૌતાર પાછો આવ્યા પછી જે નાટક ભજવવાની આશા હતી એના પર જ સૌની મીટ હતી. જોકે રામૌતાર લશ્કરમાં કંઈ તો પ કે બંદૂક ચલાવવા નહોતો ગયો, તે છતાં સિપાઈઓનાં મળમૂત્ર ઉપાડતાં ઉપાડતાં સિપાઈ જેવી થોડી અકડતા ને જુસ્સો એનામાં આવ્યાં જ હશે એમ સૌ ધારતા હતા. લશ્કરી વરદી પહેર્યા પછી એ જૂનો રામૌતાર તો ખરેખર જ નહોતો રહ્યો. સ્વગૃહે પાછા ફરીને એની પત્ની ગૌરીનાં કરતૂતો સાંભળ્યા બાદ એનું જુવાન લોહી બદનામીને લીધે ઉકળી ન ઊઠે એ વાતમાં શો માલ હતો?

ગોરી જ્યારે પરણીને સાસરે આવી ત્યારે તો લજ્જમણીના છોડ જેવી હતી. જ્યાં સુધી રામૌતાર ગામમાં હતો ત્યાં સુધી એણે લાંબો ધૂમટો તાણી જ રાખ્યો હતો. મજાલ હતી કોઈની કે એના રૂપરંગ, એનો ચહેરો કોઈ જોઈ શકે ? પતિએ જ્યારે વિદાય લીધી ત્યારે એ એવી તો હીબકે હીબકે રડી હતી કે સાંભળનારને લાગે કે જાણે એનું સૌભાગ્ય

Figure 4.1:

The Story “Do Hāth” in Bengali and Gujarati Translation, from the *Kathābhārātī* series (1975).

The relationship between Hindi and Urdu as two literary registers of a common language has a long and fraught history, particularly with regard to communal tensions. While Hindustani remained the mother tongue of Indians of diverse backgrounds, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Urdu register became increasingly associated with Muslims and the Hindi register became associated with Hindus. At the time of Indian Independence, nationalists debated the possibilities of using Hindi and/or Urdu as the national languages of the new nation. Yet Hindi was given the status of official language of India, while Urdu today only receives state patronage in one of India's twenty-nine states.³ The Progressive Writers' Association remained closely attuned to the language question.

Over the course of the twentieth century, there was a shift of focus for Progressive writers from establishing Hindustani, the common register shared between Hindi and Urdu, as the national language of independent India, to promoting Urdu language and literature in non-written, transliterated and translated forms. As one of the most outspoken representatives of the Progressive Writers' Movement, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, Chughtai's views on language and script stood in opposition to a nationalist position that equated language and community.⁴ Her insights regarding the continued significance of Urdu in India in spite of its partial displacement foresaw contemporary nostalgia for a cosmopolitan, pre-colonial past and the space of secular possibility that Urdu continues to evoke. In this chapter, I argue that Chughtai has become a signifier of Urdu even though the cultural nostalgia for Urdu is at odds with her own progressive politics. Indeed her insistence upon a secular vision of Urdu literature

3 Urdu is the official language of Jammu and Kashmir. It is also recognized as a second language in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Telangana, and Uttar Pradesh.

4 On the historical connection between language communities and nationalism, see Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed (London: Verso, 2006), 67–82.

is what enables her utility as a link between past and future.

“Twins in different clothing:”⁵ A Brief History of the Hindi/Urdu Divide

The 2001 Indian census counts “Hindi” and “Urdu” as two distinct languages.⁶ This seemingly straightforward division belies a complex, closely intertwined history of the two “languages.” While some might consider what we today call “Hindi” and “Urdu” to be two registers of a common spoken language, the process by which these two registers have become historically reified as the official languages of the Indian Union government and the national language of Pakistan respectively reveals a great deal about contemporary attitudes toward Hindi and Urdu in modern South Asia.

Historical linguists date the beginning of what we now refer to as the Hindi and Urdu languages to approximately the time of the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the early thirteenth century. In this period, a spoken dialect of the Apabhramśa language from the area of Delhi gave rise to the idiom of the Sultanate court, Hindavī. The establishment of the Sultanate across broad regions of Northern and Western India helped to spread the idioms of Delhi across a linguistically and culturally heterogeneous population. In this way, Hindavī became a

5 The metaphor of twins is taken from C. Shackle and Rupert Snell, *Hindi and Urdu since 1800: A Common Reader*, SOAS South Asian Texts, no. 1 (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990), 1. Also see Chughtai’s use of the term “garment” for the two scripts below.

6 In addition to the 257,919,635 responses of “Hindi” as mother tongue, the category Hindi languages also includes 164,129,007 other individuals, including those who responded Bhojpuri, Chattisgarhi, Haryanvi, Magadhi, Marwari, Mewari, and Rajasthani, each of which counts more than 5,000,000 speakers, as well as numerous other languages. In contrast, the category “Urdu” consists only of those who responded to the census that Urdu was their mother tongue. “Abstract of Speakers’ Strength of Languages and Mother Tongues,” *2001 Census of India*, 2001, http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/Statement1.aspx.

supraregional language. Carried by merchants, pilgrims, soldiers, and intellectuals, the prestige language associated with the court spread across what is today referred to as the Hindi belt.⁷ In Mughal times, a distinction was made between the language of the Delhi court, and the related *Braj Bhāṣā*, associated with western regions of the Hindi heartland. The Mughal court patronized compositions in both idioms.⁸ At the same time, writers in places such as Gujarat and the Deccan wrote in dialects that had evolved from the earlier spread of Hindavī while continuing to interact with the courtly language, resulting in hybridized forms of literary expression usually called Gujarī and Dakkanī Urdu, respectively. Taken together, the emerging cosmopolitan vernacular, to use Sheldon Pollock's phrase,⁹ forms the basis both of Modern Standard Urdu and Modern Standard Hindi.¹⁰

The linguistic situation of Hindi and Urdu is complicated because of the simultaneous influence of two prestige languages—on the one hand, Classical Sanskrit, the written language of political authority, literature, and a broad range of knowledge-systems in first millennium South Asia; and on the other, Persian, the language of the Eastern Islamicate world in the post-Mongol

7 On early compositions in Hindavī, see Aditya Behl, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

8 See Allison Busch, *Poetry of Kings: The Classical Hindi Literature of Mughal India*, South Asia Research (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

9 Sheldon Pollock, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (1998): 6–37.

10 For lengthier accounts of the history of Hindi/Urdu, see Thomas Oberlies, *A Historical Grammar of Hindi*, Grazer Vergleichende Arbeiten, Bd. 19 (Graz: Leykam, 2005), vi–vii; Shackle and Snell, *Hindi and Urdu since 1800*, 1–23; Colin P. Masica, *The Indo-Aryan Languages*, Cambridge Language Surveys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

period.¹¹ Just as modern Hindi and Urdu speakers borrow extensively from English, the contemporary language of cosmopolitan prestige, so too in pre-modern times Sanskrit and Persian loanwords and expressions were absorbed into the language. Authors also appropriated, manipulated, and synthesized the literary forms and epistemologies with which the languages were associated.

In ensuing centuries, a variety of closely related, yet distinct, bodies of literature began to emerge in the Hindi belt. Braj Bhāṣā poets from the late fifteenth century onwards used the vernacular for devotional poetry, laying the foundation for increasing Braj composition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The regional dialect of Avadhī around the area of Lucknow and Western Bihar was patronized by local rulers, leading to the creation of a significant tradition of Sufi poetry.¹² At the Mughal court, Persian remained the primary vehicle of learned composition, though poetic compositions in the Persianized language of the court (sometimes called *rekhta* “mixed”) began to appear with increasing frequency throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹³

By the nineteenth century, this language, now referred to as Urdu (from *zabān-e urdū-e mu‘allā* “The Language of the Exalted Court”), finally began to replace Persian as the preferred written language of North Indian and Deccani elites. Supported by the British, the Hindūstānī *lingua franca* of the United Provinces and Bihar became the language of imperial administration,

11 On the cosmopolitan languages of South Asia in the Early Modern period, see Daniel Sheffield, *Cosmopolitan Zarathustras: Religion, Translation, and Prophethood in Iran and South Asia*, forthcoming. I thank him for his valuable comments on this section.

12 For example S. C. R. Weightman and Aditya Behl, trans., *Madhumālātī: An Indian Sufi Romance*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

13 See Ralph Russell and Khurshidul Islam, *Three Mughal Poets; Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan*, UNESCO Collection of Representative Works: Indian Series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

written in the Arabic script. Urdu literature was patronized both by the British and local rulers. The introduction of lithographic printing in the early 19th century sped along the rapid creation of an Urdu-reading public sphere, which in the years following the end of the Mughal Empire in 1857 became associated with the new Muslim middle class (*ashrāf*).¹⁴ At the same time, a new Hindu middle class, increasingly sensitive to a concept of civilizational difference between Muslims and Hindus, began to look to a pre-Islamic Sanskritic, rather than a Persianate, past. Rather than interpreting Hinduism and Indian Islam as two facets of Indian civilization, Hindu communalists held that Indian Islam was fundamentally alien to India and was instead attached to a putative Arab civilization. In 1893, the Nāgarī Prachārīnī Sabhā (The Society for the Promotion of Nagari [Script]) was formed in Varanasi, advocating for the adoption of the Devanagari script and the replacement of Persian and Arabic loanwords with words of Sanskrit origin.¹⁵

Hindustani, Nationalism, National Language

Conflicts over Urdu and Hindi language have centered on issues of both vocabulary and script. In 1900, the British government of the Northwestern Provinces and Oudh (the future United Provinces) officially decreed that government documents would henceforth be printed both in Devanagari and in Persian script.¹⁶ Proponents of Urdu perceived this to be a threat, particularly because the bifurcation of script meant that it would become increasingly easy to

14 See Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007).

15 Christopher Rolland King, *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth Century North India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1994).

16 Ibid., 155.

associate Urdu in Perso-Arabic script with Muslims and Hindi in Devanagari script with Hindus. In 1903, the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū (The Association for the Promotion of Urdu) was founded to promote Urdu in the wake of the 1900 decision, and under the leadership of ‘Abdul-Ḥaqq, the Anjuman grew to encompass 40 branches spread out throughout the cities of India. From an early period, ‘Abdul-Ḥaqq was concerned with the question of national language that could be used across India, believing that Urdu was the most logical candidate for this role. Perceiving that a national language of India would need to be able to fully express secular learning in the same way that English did, Ḥaqq set about a massive campaign of translation and dictionary-writing in which hundreds of neologisms were added to the Urdu language so that Urdu could be used as a language of education. ‘Abdul-Ḥaqq had close ties with many of the leaders of the Indian National Congress. He corresponded with Mohandas Gandhi, who believed that the shared foundation of Hindi and Urdu could serve as the basis for a national language. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi writes that the universal language of India should be Hindi with the “option of writing in Nagari or Persian characters,” continuing that the Sanskritized and Persianized registers of Hindi and Urdu respectively were “foreign,” despite the fact that they were becoming entrenched, to the majority of Indians.¹⁷

By 1920, the Indian National Congress had declared that Hindustani should be the national language of India. In 1937, Jawaharlal Nehru published an article entitled “The Question of Language” in which he refers to Hindustani as a unified language of which two aspects are Hindi and Urdu and concludes that Hindustani is “the only possible all-India language,” which “vaguely [...] includes both Hindi and Urdu” and in which both scripts

17 M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj, Or, Indian Home Rule*, Rev. new ed (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1939), 81.

“should have full play.”¹⁸ Crucially, Nehru, whose own first language was Urdu, denies the relationship of the two registers of the language to religious communities, but rather states, “Urdu is the language of towns and Hindi the language of the villages.”¹⁹ Further, authors in Hindustani must strive both to develop the language “for the proper expression of modern ideas” and to write “for a mass audience.”²⁰

The Progressive Writers’ Movement was closely invested in these debates. While the Progressive Writers wanted their work to reach the largest audience possible, disseminating their work was a difficult proposition given the multilingual diversity of late colonial India. Their official position at the outset of the movement was to defuse the communalism question entirely by advocating for the adoption of the Roman rather than either Devanagari or Urdu script.²¹ The original manifesto of the Progressive Writers’ Association included as one of the goals of the organization “to strive for the acceptance of a common language (Hindustani) and a common

18 Jawaharlal Nehru, *Nehru, the First Sixty Years*, ed. Dorothy Norman (New York: John Day Co, 1965), 521–522.

19 Ibid., 524.

20 Ibid., 525–526.

21 The idea of writing Indian languages in Roman script was mostly prominently advocated by the Bengali linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji, who in 1935 had published *A Roman Alphabet for India* (Calcutta: n.p., 1935). While such an innovation might seem outlandish today, one should note that in 1928, just seven years before Chatterji’s publication, the Kemalist Turkish government had passed a law to replace the script used to write Turkish with the Roman alphabet, an initiative which gained quick and wide acceptance. See Emmanuel Szurek, “The Linguist and the Politician: The Türk Dil Kurumu and the Field of Power in the 1930-40s,” in *Order and Compromise: Government Practices in Turkey from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Early 21st Century*, ed. Marc Aymes, Benjamin Gourisse, and Élise Massicard, Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia 113 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 68–96.

script (Indo-Roman) for India.”²² While the proposal to write in Roman script proved unpopular and was quickly dropped from discussion, Progressive Writers spoke and wrote frequently about the idea of a national language (*bainul-aqvāmī zabān*, *rāshtrabhāshā*) as part of their broader political program.

Prominent among the early Progressive Writers who wrote about the language question was Sajjad Zaheer. In 1944, he published an essay entitled “Hindī, Urdū, Hindūstānī kā maṣlah” (The Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani Problem),²³ which was later expanded into a short book.²⁴ For Zāhīr, the language controversy is part of the legacy of imperialism’s divide-and-rule policy of setting communities of the colonized against each other that needed be overcome by the new nation. He writes that it is the duty of the Progressive Writer to lessen the separation between Hindi and Urdu by writing in Hindustani.²⁵ Progressive authors should, like Premchand, Upendranath Ashk, and others, learn and publish in both languages.²⁶ Progressives should use

22 Mulk Raj Anand, “Manifesto of the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association, London,” *Left Review* 2 (1937): 240.

23 Sajjad Zaheer, “Hindī, Urdū, Hindūstānī kā maṣlah,” *Nayā adab* 3 (1944): 1–31.

24 Sajjad Zaheer, *Urdū, Hindī, Hindustānī* (Bombay: Kutub Publishers, 1947).

25 *urdū aur hindī kī maujūda ‘alāḥadagī ko taslīm karte hū’ e hamēn koshish karnī chāhī’ e ki yih ‘alāḥadagī kam ho. is li’ e zurūrī hai ki is vaqt hindī aur urdū kā vuh lisānī ‘ilāqa jo donoṅ meṅ mustarik hai, je sahl urdū, sahl hindī yā hindustānī kā nām diyā jātā hai, qā’im rahe aur usse barābar barḥāne kī koshish kī jā’ e.*

Acknowledging the present separation of Urdu and Hindi, we desire to strive to lessen this separation. Therefore, at this time, it is necessary that that the linguistic neighborhood which is common to both, namely that which is called “Simple Urdu,” “Simple Hindi,” or Hindustani remain in use and that we strive to enlarge it. *Ibid.*, 46.

26 *adīb donoṅ zabāneṅ sīkhīn aur us silsila meṅ ham prem-chand, ashk, akhtar ḥusain rā’epūrī, ḍāktar tārāchand, paṇḍit sindurlāl kī miṣāl par ‘amal karen, donoṅ zabāneṅ jānne se adīb ba-āsānī apnī kitābeṅ urdū aur hindī meṅ shā’i’ kar sakeṅge. us meṅ adabī aur mālī donoṅ tarah se un kā fā’ida hai.*

We should act on the example of those writers who have learned both languages, a group including Premchand, Ashk, Akhtar Ḥusain Raipuri, Dr. Tarachand, and Pandit Sundarlal.

the Hindustani register in all public performance.²⁷ Urdu works should be transcribed into Hindi and vice-versa.²⁸ Finally, independent India should accept both Hindi and Urdu as national languages but should strive to promote their shared aspects.²⁹

Ultimately, though, the Indian Constitution adopted in 1950 recognized no national language. The aspiration of a common Hindustani, an idea shared in varying degrees by Gandhi, Nehru, and the Progressive Writers, failed during the Constituent Assembly debates of the late 1940s. Hindi in Devanagari script and English were decided upon as the official languages of the Union government, while the regional state governments of India were free to choose their own official languages.³⁰

By knowing both languages, writers can easily publish their books in Urdu and Hindi. This is beneficial both from a literary and a financial standpoint. Ibid., 46–47.

- 27 *ham sab koshish karen ki filmon, drāmon, taqrīron, akhbāron aur raidiyo par aisī urdū yā aisī hindī isti ‘māl ho jo ziyāda se ziyāda logon kī samajh meṇ ā’e. raidiyo par se urdū aur hindī donoṇ nashar hon. lekin urdū ko ghaṭā kar hindī na hu’ā aur hindī ke badale urdū na ho. sāth sāth mushtarika hindustānī kā bhī progrām ho. urdū aur hindī ke progrām ḥatā- ‘l-imkān sahl zabān meṇ hon.*

We should all strive to use such Urdu or Hindi in films, dramas, speeches, news reports, and radio that the most people can understand. Both Urdu and Hindi appear on the radio. But simply lessening the Urdu doesn’t make something Hindi, and it won’t do simply to replace the Hindi with Urdu. There should be also be shared programs in Hindustani. The Urdu and Hindi programs should be in the easiest language possible. Ibid., 47.

- 28 *urdū meṇ hindī aur hindī meṇ urdū adab ko maqbūl banāne kī koshish kī jā’e. [...] hindī aur urdū kitābon ke tarjume bhī ek dusre kī zabān meṇ chhapeṇ.*

We should strive to popularize Urdu in Hindi and Hindi in Urdu literature. [...] Translations of Hindi and Urdu books should appear in both languages. Ibid.

- 29 *hindustān kī bain al-aqwāmī zabān, hindī aur urdū donoṇ hon jis kā jī chāhe, jonsī zabān sīkhe. lekin yihān bhī aisī koshish jāri rahe ki hindī aur urdū kī mushtarik chīzeṇ ubhareṇ.*

India’s intercommunal languages should be both Hindī and Urdu, and one should learn which one one likes. But we should also strive that it be the shared aspects of Hindi and Urdu that flourish. Ibid., 48.

- 30 Pritipuspa Mishra, “The Mortality of Hindustani,” *Parallax* 18, no. 3 (2012): 80–81.

Ismat Chughtai and the Place of Urdu in Post-Independence India

During Chughtai's lifetime, the venues for publishing and the size of the Urdu-reading public decreased dramatically, in part due to the large-scale emigration to Pakistan of literate, Urdu-speaking North Indian Muslims. While actual estimates vary, official statistics count more than seven million individuals, almost all Muslims, leaving India during the four years after Partition.³¹ Nevertheless, Urdu authors like Chughtai who remained in India began to find new audiences through translation into English and transliteration into Devanagari script.

Already in the pre-colonial period, Chughtai expressed a desire to have her works translated into English.³² "Gaiṇdā" (1938) was translated in 1940 by Ahmed Ali, contributor to *Angāre* and writer of *Twilight in Delhi*, as "The Little Mother" and published in the English literary digest *Folios of New Writing*. Here, Chughtai was published alongside new short stories from George Orwell and Virginia Woolf (Figure 4.2);³³ Next, "Liḥāf" was translated in 1944 by

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- 31 See Prashant Bharadwaj, Asim Khwaja, and Atif Mian, "The Big March: Migratory Flows after the Partition of India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 35 (August 30, 2008): 39–49.
- 32 This is mentioned, for instance, in her remembrance of the humorist Paṭras Bukhārī. See Ismat Chughtai, *My Friend, My Enemy: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*, trans. Tahira Naqvi (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), 188.
- 33 The patronage Chughtai found at this early point was undoubtedly due to Ahmed Ali's close associations with many of the members of the Bloomsbury Group during his time in London. One of Ali's earliest short stories, "Our Lane," was published in *New Writing* in Autumn 1937. Ali's novel, *Twilight in Delhi*, also published in 1940, appeared on Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press. Ismat Chughtai, "The Little Mother," trans. Ahmed Ali, *Folios of New Writing* 2 (Autumn 1940): 115–27. The literary journal *Folios of New Writing*, which succeeded the earlier journal *New Writing*, was edited by John Lehmann (1907–1987), a poet and critic closely associated with Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group. See Carlo Coppola, "Ahmed Ali in Conversation: An Excerpt from an Interview," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 9 (1994): 16–19.

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

THE LITTLE MOTHER

(Translated from the Urdu by Ahmed Ali)

I

'Now supposing this is a hut,' Genda and I imagined to ourselves as we crept under the bush. And we bent down and began to sweep the ground with our hands. Soon we were sitting happily on the clean and well-swept floor of yellow earth. After a while we found ourselves busy at our favourite game of playing the bride. Genda made a veil of her red and dirty head-cloth, pulled it low down over her face, and sat huddled up like a bride. Gently I drew the veil aside and saw the bride's face. A deep flush came into Genda's round and chubby face. Her eyelids began to throb with a wistful merriment as she tried to suppress her laughter.

'Now . . . Genda, now it's my turn,' I said with envy. . . .

'Oho!' Brother said, peeping through the branches. 'What's going on here?'

With nervousness Genda tore the veil away from her face and sat mortified. Our hearts began to thump loudly.

Not only Brother, if anyone had caught us at playing the bride we would have been thrashed. We always played this wishful game alone, concealed from the eyes of others.

'Well,' I said coquettishly, 'we are just playing.'

Brother was in a good mood perhaps. He crept under the bush and sat near us. But he soon got tired.

'But why are you sitting here, you fools?' he said, clearing a branch that was hurting his nose.

'And you, Genda,' he said, pinching her lovely cheeks, 'why are you here? I am going to tell Natha.'

Genda opened her big brown eyes wide and looked all around.

115

Figure 4.2:

The First English Translation of Ismat Chughtai's Writing, "The Little Mother," trans. Ahmed Ali, *Folios of New Writing*, 1940

Khawaja Ahmed Abbas and published in the Bombay journal *The Sound*.³⁴ Notably, these two earliest translations of Chughtai's writing into English were done by fellow Progressive writers, and fit well with their attempts to disseminate Urdu literature to new audiences.

Indian government agencies also played an important role in the translation and dissemination of Chughtai's works. The mission of the Sāhitya Akademi, India's national academy of letters (est. 1954) is in part to oversee the creation of a national literary canon. Since its establishment, the Sāhitya Akademi has published representative literary works from each of the scheduled languages of the Indian Constitution. In 1957, Chughtai's short story, "Nanhī kī Nānī," was translated as "Tiny's Granny" by the literary scholar Ralph Russell for the first volume of the Sāhitya Akademi's publication of *Contemporary Indian Short Stories*.³⁵ As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, her stories were also included in the Urdu volume of the Sāhitya Akademi's *Kathābhārati* project, which was published simultaneously in several of India's regional languages, making Chughtai's work available to a wide swathe of the Indian population.

As Chughtai's fame as a writer grew, her short stories and novels began to appear in Hindi. Owing to the mutual intelligibility of Urdu and Hindi, adaptations of Chughtai's work into Hindi are, generally speaking, closer to transliterations from Urdu into Devanagari script than to independent translations. Many of the early translations of Progressive Writing into Hindi were published by Nilābh Publications in the city of Allahabad. The owner of the press, Upendranāth Ashk, had begun his career as an Urdu author before he began publishing in Hindi in 1932 on the

34 Ismat Chughtai, "The Quilt," trans. Khawaja Ahmed Abbas, *The Sound (Bombay)*, 1944. I have been unable to locate an extant copy of *The Sound* from before 1947.

35 Ismat Chughtai, "Tiny's Granny," in *Contemporary Indian Short Stories I*, trans. Ralph Russell (Delhi: Sāhitya Akademi, 1959), 117–29.

advice of the author Premchand.³⁶ Ashk had worked closely with several Progressive authors at All-India Radio. In 1948, Ashk moved to Allahabad, where he founded the publishing house Nīlābh Prakāśan.³⁷ The introduction to Nīlābh Prakāśan's 1960 Hindi publication of Chughtai's novel *Ziddī* expressed the publisher's desire to bring out more Urdu authors' works in Hindi so that they could reach a broader audience, stating, "After Partition, the publication of Urdu literature received a major setback. Because they do not know Hindi, only with a very long delay could Urdu authors' compositions come into Hindi in collected form."³⁸ The editor goes on to assert that one of Chughtai's greatest qualities as a writer was her ability to capture dialogue in simple colloquial language, a feature that no doubt made her work relatively easy to convey in Hindi.

*manovaijñānik satyon ko bebākī se aṅkit karne ke alāvā, Ismat kā kamāl unkī bol-chāl kī pravahmān bhāṣā meṅ hai. Ismat kitābī bhāṣā nahī likhtī. unhoṅ-ne yū. pī. meṅ janma liyā, jahāṅ urdū-hindī donoṅ janmīn, palīn aur parvān carhīn, islie Ismat kī bhāṣā meṅ kuch ajīb-sī saraltā, anāyāstā, pravāh aur mohinī hai.*³⁹

In addition to fearlessly recording psychological truths, Ismat's excellence was her dialogue which is in colloquial language. Ismat does not write in bookish language. She was born in U.P., where both Urdu and Hindi were born, brought up, and developed. For this reason, in Ismat's language, there is amazing simplicity, spontaneity, flow, and charm.

36 Rockwell, *Upendranath Ashk*, 50. Premchand had notably been an early proponent of publishing simultaneously in Urdu and in Hindi, for which he was praised by Progressive writers like Sajjad Zaheer.

37 Ibid., 25–30.

38 *vibhājan ke bād urdū-sāhitya ke prakāśan ko barā dhakkā lagā aur hindī na jānne ke kāraṅ bahut der tak urdū-kathākāroṅ kī racnāeṅ saṅkalit rūp se hindī meṅ nahī ā sakīn.* 'Ismat Chughtā'ī, *Ziddī (Hindi)*, ed. Upendranāth Aśk (Allahabad: Nīlābh Prakāśan, 1960), 1.

39 Ibid., 2.

By emphasizing the common link between the two languages, the editor points out the familiarity of Chughtai's speech to his readers—a notion very close to Chughtai's own description of her language. Also worth noting is his claim that her writing is characterized by simplicity and charm rather than bookish erudition. Such a claim can be read in two ways. On the one hand, singling her work out as possessing charm (*mohinī*), a word which refers to the enchanting power of female beauty, engages in a gendered reading of Chughtai's work. Such a claim mirrors Urdu criticism on Chughtai that highlights her usage of *begamātī zabān* (ladies' language), discussed in Chapter One.⁴⁰ At the same time, the idea of writing in simple rather than bookish language was advocated by in the various manifestos of the Progressive Writers' Movement as a way of overcoming individualist conceits in literature.

Although the colloquial nature of Chughtai's language might have lent itself to Hindi adaptation, translators still altered the language of the text. Reading the same story side-by-side in its Urdu original and its Hindi adaptation is a revealing enterprise, one that can tell us much about the perceived boundaries of the two registers.⁴¹ In the case of Ashk's Hindi publication of *Ziddī*, my comparison of the texts revealed that the enterprise of translation resulted in a fairly unobtrusive rendering of the original text. While the changes from Urdu into Hindi occurred primarily in words of Perso-Arabic origin, less than one in ten words had been changed, including such minor phonetic differences as Hindi *tab* for Urdu *to*. This leads me to conclude

40 See Minault, "Begamati Zaban: Women's Language and Culture in the Nineteenth Century."

41 On the phenomenon of Hindi translations of Urdu texts more broadly, see Christine Everaert, *Tracing the Boundaries between Hindi and Urdu: Lost and Added in Translation between 20th Century Short Stories*, Brill's Indological Library, v. 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

that at least in the editor's eyes, Chughtai's work was generally comprehensible to educated readers of Hindi with only very minor alteration.

After 1947, very few of the Urdu-language literary journals in which Chughtai had published in during her early career remained in operation in India. During this period, Chughtai increasingly sent her works to journals published in Pakistan—*Nuqūsh* and *Qāfila* in Lahore, *Nayā Daur*, *Afkār*, and *Naqsh* in Karachi. Sometimes her stories would only appear in India after they had been collected in edited volumes. Yet increasingly, Chughtai also began to have her work published in Hindi translation. The translation of *Ziddī* (1960) was followed by publications of a collection of Chughtai's short stories entitled *Kumārī* (1960), *Ṭerhī Lakīr* (1967) and *Ajīb Ādamī* (1972).⁴² According to Ralph Russell, Chughtai would have her stories published in Devanagari even before they appeared in Perso-Arabic script through Hindi journals like the Allahabad-based journal *Urdū Sāhitya*.⁴³

During the Bangladesh Liberation Movement and the lead-up to the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, debates concerning the relationship between India's Muslims and Pakistan raged throughout the Indian and Pakistani press. In particular, the loyalties of the Urdu press were openly called into question on the Indian side of the border.⁴⁴ In this context, Chughtai began to write about the role of Urdu in India and started to advocate for script reform, echoing older Progressive efforts to encourage writing Urdu in Roman script and to transliterate Urdu in

42 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī, *Kumārī (Hindi)*, ed. Upendranāth Aśk (Allahabad: Nilābh Prakāśan, 1960); 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī, *Ṭerhī Lakīr: Hindī Upniyās* (Bombay: Adabī Publishers, 1967); 'Iṣmat Chughtā'ī, *Ajīb Ādamī (Hindi)* (Delhi: Rajpal and Sons, 1972).

43 Ather Farouqui, "An Interview with Ralph Russell," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 19 (1995): 171.

44 Antara Datta, *Refugees and Borders in South Asia: The Great Exodus of 1971* (London: Routledge, 2012), 77–82.

Devanagari. In 1971, Chughtai published a provocative article entitled “Urdū kā rasm al-khatt badal diyā jā’e” (Urdu’s script should be changed), in the Karachi journal *Nayā Daur* (New Era). Publishing such an article in a Pakistani journal at the time implicitly cast ironic criticism on the efforts of the Pakistani government to impose Perso-Arabic script on the Bengali-speaking citizens of East Pakistan, which had in part led to the Bangladesh Liberation Movement.⁴⁵ In it, she writes, “Urdu is dead in colleges. It has been buried in schools [...] but it still remains on tongues; it is still spoken and understood in every corner of the nation. The blame or credit for this should go to either Hindi films or singers of Qawwalis⁴⁶.”⁴⁷ Chughtai introduces here a critical distinction between Urdu as a written language, which in her perspective is essentially moribund in India, and Urdu as a spoken heritage, which is alive and well in the Indian cultural sphere. Chughtai likens the ‘death’ of written Urdu in India to the decline of Persian—though Persian itself is no longer written in India, expressions borrowed from the language are still alive and well in many of India’s languages.⁴⁸

45 Aamir Mufti records that the noted Pakistani Islamic scholar Sayyid Sulaimān Nadvī had written of the Bengalis of East Pakistan that “the majority of Bengalis cannot be delivered from enslavement to Hindu culture, Hindu mythology, and Hindu literature, until such time as they free their language from Sanskritic Bangla and Sanskritic script.” Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 152.

46 A musical style originating as Sufi devotional music which has also been popularized through Indian Cinema and the superstar singers including Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

47 *urdū kālijon meṇ mar ga’ī. iskūlon meṇ dafan ho ga’ī [...] magar phir bhī zabānon par ḍaṭī hū’ī hai bolī jāṭī hai aur mulk ke kone kone meṇ samjhī bhī jāṭī hai. aur urdū ko yih hamagīrī bakhshne kā ilzām yā in ‘ām hindūstānī filmon yā qavvālon ko milnā chāhī’e.* ‘Iṣmat Chughtā’ī, “Urdū kā rasm al-khatt badal diyā jā’e,” *Nayā daur* 55–56 (1971): 18.

48 *fārsī khatm ho ga’ī lekin us ke bahut se alfāz ab bhī marāṭhī, gujarātī, aur dakkan kī zabānon meṇ zinda haiṇ. agar fārsī ko ziyāda se ziyāda devanāgarī lipī meṇ samjhā jāṭā to aur ziyāda zinda rah jāṭī.*
Persian is finished, but many of its words live on in Marathi, Gujarati, and the languages

In her account of Urdu, Chughtai does not address the disestablishment of the language, or for that matter, the other vernacular languages, by the postcolonial Indian state. Yet, the selection of English and Hindi in Devanāgarī script as the languages of the federal government had a demonstrable impact on the opportunities available to speakers of those languages vis-à-vis other Indians. As political scientist Paul Brass argues,

the relationship between possible language choices and life chances in India presents us with three broad levels: 1) higher level elite speakers of either English or Hindi; 2) intermediate level elite speakers of Hindi only, or a regional language; 3) lower level non-elite, poorly educated or even illiterate speakers of a regional language and/or a local ‘mother tongue.’⁴⁹

When asked about the relative privilege of Hindi, Chughtai demurred by claiming that the real power belonged to elite speakers of English while the rest of the population was equally unable to access positions of privilege and power.

Her lack of attachment to the Urdu script puts Chughtai in direct conflict with proponents of Urdu who strongly identify the language itself with the script. Yet, script and language are not the same. A clear example of this difference is the case of Turkish, where the script was changed completely and yet the language continues to thrive. Yet, as Brass argues, for those who are dogmatically attached to the Urdu script, there may be an attachment to the privileges that Urdu literacy had bestowed during the colonial regime. Brass writes that many of these proponents of Urdu script “came primarily from upper class Muslim families of landlords and government servants, in search of government jobs, for whom the defence of Urdu against the claims of

of the Deccan. If Persian had come to be understood to the maximum extent in Devanagari script, it would be even more alive today. Ibid., 19.

49 Paul Brass, “Elite Interests, Popular Passions, and Social Power in the Language Politics of India,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, no. 3 (2004): 375.

Hindi served the purpose of maintaining their privileged access to those jobs.”⁵⁰ Writing more broadly about the passionate attachment some people have to language, particularly when the language is seen as being endangered, he continues, “It is one’s sense of self that is at stake, one’s self-respect, one’s sense of importance, the loss of the sense of centrality of one’s person in a world of communication. When a person says, ‘I love my language,’ what is meant is, ‘I love myself,’ a statement that cannot be uttered aloud in society.”⁵¹ In this light, it appears that Urdu, or at least Urdu in Arabic script, was not central to Chughtai’s definition of self and thus she did not feel the need to defend Urdu.

Chughtai’s apparent disregard for Urdu script could also be understood as an attempt to demonstrate her national allegiance. Arabic script is a visible marker of difference; among the most extreme Hindu nationalists, it is a marker of Muslim communalism rather than Indian identity. Thus, script becomes a site for the minority to prove its allegiance to the state. When speaking of the minority dilemma among Pakistani Shias, Akbar Hyder writes, “Having asserted its separatist identity at one level, the minority carries the onus of constantly proving its fidelity at another level.”⁵² In the case of Chughtai, though she is identified as Muslim and Urdu-speaking, she does not attempt to assert this difference. Yet, she may indeed be responding to the context in which Muslims are marked as different due to the nationalist histories of India and Pakistan and the link between linguistic and religious nationalism among some Muslim groups.

There are also contextual reasons why Chughtai would not be as interested in the conflict between Urdu and Hindi. Chughtai was removed from the conflicts and changes in North India,

50 Ibid., 355.

51 Ibid., 365.

52 Hyder, *Reliving Karbala*, 157.

and was focused on the context of Bombay. As far as she was concerned, state patronage of Hindi had not helped the language. Anyone who could afford it, including her family and those of other prominent Urdu writers in Bombay, sent their children to English-medium schools. Thus, the real issue for Chughtai lay in the increasing hegemonic status of English as the language of privilege over the ‘indigenous’ languages of India.

Chughtai argued that the language of literary expression was not as important as the assurance that her thoughts be conveyed to an audience. She writes that it is immaterial whether readers read her work in translation or in Urdu:

*mujhe zabān se ko’ī bughz nahīn. vuh khvāh kisī zabān main chhape mere khyālāt ziyāda se ziyāda logon tak pahunch jā’ēn. bas itnī hī merī khvāhish hai. main Urdū ke li’e nahīn logon ke li’e likhtī hūn. gujarātī yā marāṭhī men agar chhap jā’e to aur khushī hotī hai. agar urdū kā rasm al-khatt badal gayā to urdū khatm ho jā’egī, yih bāt samajh men nahīn ātī. yih to ittifāq hai ki urdū ‘arabī rasm al-khatt men likhī ga’ī.*⁵³

I have no attachment to the language, whatever language of publication, my thoughts should reach the most people. This is my only desire. I don’t write for Urdu, I write for people. If published in Gujarati or Marathi, I’m even happier. I don’t understand why it is said that if the script of Urdu is changed, Urdu as a language will be finished. It was sheer coincidence that Urdu was written in Arabic script.

Like Gandhi before her,⁵⁴ Chughtai argued that it was almost inevitable that Urdu would come to be written in Devanagari script in India. As opposed to those writers who insisted that it was a significant part of their identity to retain Urdu in its current fashion, in advocating for such a measure, Chughtai was attempting to resuscitate a secular vision of language akin to that which had motivated ‘Abdul-Ḥaqq’s work to develop the secular vocabulary of Urdu and Sajjad Zaheer’s proposal to adopt Hindustani as a national language. Ultimately, Chughtai argued

53 Chughtai, “Urdū kā rasm al-khatt badal diyā jā’e,” 19.

54 See *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1958), v. 14, 25.

vehemently against a Herderian equation of language and people (simply, that Urdu = Muslim). Literary scholar Aamir Mufti writes, “Urdu is a homeless literature, its history an exemplary embodiment of some of the central processes and dilemmas of modern culture: nation formation, canonization, minority consciousness, ‘partitioning’ of cultures, exile and displacement, crossing of borders, and anxious and agonistic formation of selves.”⁵⁵ I argue that in suggesting Urdu be reunited with Hindi in Devanagari script, Chughtai was in fact trying to work against precisely the processes which Mufti highlights. What was at stake for Chughtai was not just the future of Urdu, but rather the possibility of a secular national language faced with the increasingly dominant role of English in India. In an anti-colonialist gesture, she writes that if Urdu and Hindi were reunited, then “the influence of English will decrease, and the new generation will not be influenced by English culture.”⁵⁶

For Chughtai, English, unlike other Indian languages, could not properly capture Indian culture. As a vociferous anti-imperialist, English remained the language of the colonizer, a language which had evolved in an alien context and which was imposed on India’s subjects. As an author renowned for the colloquialism of her dialogues, capturing the idiom and humor of her stories in English is particularly challenging. In a 1972 interview with Carlo Coppola, then a graduate student at the University of Chicago, Chughtai questioned Coppola’s repeated asking about English translations of her work, responding,

Unless a thing is translated into English, it doesn’t have any value, and if it is translated, it is not translated very well! Is that what you’re saying? In English

55 Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Literature*, 244.

56 *angrezī kā dabdaba kam ho jātā, na ’ī pod angrezī kalchar se muta’aṣṣir na hotī.* Chughtā’ī, “Urdū kā rasm al-khatt badal diyā jā’e,” 20.

you can't get the real thing. Why? I like to see my things translated. But you can't get the nuances of Urdu into English translation.⁵⁷

The reason for the decline of Hindi and Urdu compared with English, as Chughtai saw it, was that the languages had become irrelevant in the job market. Neither language was a serious competitor for the secular status of English. Rather than diminishing in influence after Indian and Pakistani Independence, English actually became more influential in both countries. In a 1985 interview with All-India Radio, Chughtai comments:

*pākistān ya 'nī lāhor khāṣ taur par hamesha se urdū kā senṭar rahā hai. lekin ab urdū kis kām ātī hai? roṭī nahīn miltī urdū se jaise yahān hindī se roṭī nahīn miltī ko 'ī sarkārī naukar ho jā'e to aur bāt hai. āp ko 'ī kām nahīn kar sakte un se. āp dekheṅ ki hindī akhbār kā sirkūleshan inglish ke akhbāroṅ aur megazīn se kam hai. to kyā ham ne apne bachoṅ ko āzādī ke ba 'd angrezī parhā 'ī. pahilī kitne convent the aur āj kitne convent hindūstān meṅ haiṅ? [...] dekhīye main ne apne bachoṅ ko urdū nahīn parhā 'ī.*⁵⁸

Pakistan, that is Lahore especially, has always been a center of Urdu. But nowadays what use is Urdu? Urdu doesn't put food on the table just like here Hindi doesn't put food on the table. If you become a government employee, that's another matter. You can't do anything with it. You can see that the circulation of Hindi newspapers is less than English newspapers and magazines. So what? We taught our children English after Independence. How many Convent [schools] were there before, and how many are there now in India? Look—I didn't teach my children Urdu.

In the end, Chughtai addresses the modern predicament of Urdu. If the leading short story author of twentieth century Urdu did not teach her own children to read the language, then what future could the language have?

Yet rather than promoting herself to a global, English-reading audience, as she had wanted to do earlier in life, Chughtai instead reached across linguistic boundaries to diverse audiences within India. In the photo below, she is pictured delivering a lecture as the chief guest

57 Coppola, "Mahfil Interviews Ismat Chughtai," 183.

58 An interview with Mujīb Siddīqī, 18 November 1985. Muḥammad Shakīl Akḥṭar, ed., *Rūbarū: raidīyo inṭarviyūz kā majmū'a* (New Delhi: Maktaba-e Jāmi'a, 2012), 293–296.



Figure 4.3:
Ismat Chughtai delivers a lecture as the chief guest (*pramukh atithi*) at the opening ceremony (*uddhāṭan samāroḥ*) of the Hindi Literature Council (*Hindī Sāhitya Pariśad*), Sawhny Collection.

at the opening ceremony of the Hindi Literature Council (Figure 4.3). Here, she speaks in front of a large sign written in Sanskritized Hindi, notably devoid of any of the Persian or Arabic words that characterize Urdu.

Chughtai addressed the question of the future of Urdu many times in later interviews. In an interview given to the magazine *Manushi* in 1983, for instance, she argued that since Indian languages are very receptive to foreign words, there is no reason why Urdu as a spoken language ought not to continue:

Urdu cannot disappear. Urdu may wear on [sic] the garments of Hindi but will survive. Urdu words are increasing every day in popular usage. I don't think the survival of a script is necessary for the survival of a language. The ordinary Hindi speaking person uses many Urdu words. In India, foreign words have never been treated as untouchable.⁵⁹

Such a view concerning the survival of Urdu in Devanagari script and in non-written media accurately predicted the role of Urdu in India today. Chughtai attempted to undo what had become the identification of Urdu with Indian Muslims alone by insisting that Urdu lived on the lives of most Indians. As we will see in the following section, Chughtai's writing lives on today in contemporary India not just in translation, but on film and on stage, where language is not constricted by script.

Chughtai's own hopes for a reunited Hindi and Urdu, which echoed earlier aspirations of a national language, continue to live on among a certain class of Indians, who are actively trying

59 Kishwar and Vanita, "An Irrepressible Spirit: An Interview with Ismat Chughtai," 7. She makes similar statements in an interview in *Debonair* magazine: "Not the script. But the language will survive. You know, most of the people in North India speak Urdu. The Hindi writers, they write in Hindi but speak in Urdu. Kamleshwar and Dharam Vir Bharti, who are eminent Hindi writers, speak in Urdu. It is their mother tongue, as they come from Allahabad. But I feel the script, which is complicated, will die. I think a good solution to ensure the survival of Urdu is to take up the Devnag[a]ri script, which is more popular and phonetically simpler." See Aqil Ahmad, "Ismat Chughtai," *Debonair*, January 1979, 13.

to renew something of the literary climate that produced writers such as Chughtai. Far from seeing Urdu as a homeless language within India, for these new “Urduwallahs,” an intense nostalgia bordering on devotion has attached itself to Urdu as a language of secular possibility, and runs against the hegemony of Indian English as a thoroughly internalized secular *lingua franca*.

Nostalgia for Urdu in India

Nostalgia for the pre-colonial Indo-Muslim past has existed since the end of the Mughal Empire in 1857. During the pre-Independence era, books like Mirzā Farḥatullāh Beg’s *Dilhī kī Ākhirī Shama’* (*The Last Candle of Delhi*, translated as *The Last Mushā’ira of Delhi*), first published in 1934, and Ahmed Ali’s English-language *Twilight in Delhi*, published in 1940, exhibited a romantic attitude toward the past.⁶⁰ Cities like Delhi, Lucknow, and Hyderabad have become loci of this nostalgia owing to the perception that they are the last enclaves in India of Urdu and the cosmopolitan way of life that had accompanied it.⁶¹ Reminiscing about the culture of Lucknow, Mirzā Ja‘far Ḥusain (1899–1989) writes:

No one can deny that Lucknow, until some time ago, was the center for an extremely bewitching and valuable *tahzīb* [culture]. The nawabs and elites of

60 Farḥatullāh Beg, *The Last Musha’irah of Dehli: A Translation into English of Farhatullah Baig’s Modern Urdu Classic, Dehli Ki Akhri Shama’ ; with an Introduction, Notes, Glossary, and Bibliography* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1979); Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi: A Novel* (London: Hogarth Press, 1940).

61 See the work of ‘Abdulḥalīm Sharar, who argued that Lucknow was the most developed representative of the pre-colonial Oriental Civilization remaining in existence. ‘Abdulḥalīm Sharar, *Lucknow, the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, trans. E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1976). On nostalgia for Lucknow, see Anna A. Suvorova, *Nostal’gija Po Lakkhnau* (Moscow: AO “Tadem,” 1995); and its English-language review V. I. Braginsky, “Review, Nostalgia Po Laknau [Nostalgia for Lucknow] by Anna Suvorova,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 60, no. 2 (1997): 390–91. For a comparison to nostalgia for Lahore in Pakistan, see Anna A. Suvorova, *Lahore: Topophilia of Space and Place* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Lucknow, its rich and poor, scholars and illiterates, Hindus and Muslims, poets and mystics, rishis and sadhus, traders and beggars, soldiers and civilians, men and women—all had contributed, as dictated by their rank, size, and ambition to the formation of that *tahzīb*.⁶²

In contemporary India, this longing for the cosmopolitan past often manifests itself through attachment to the Urdu language and texts written in Urdu. Genres of film, such as the Muslim social and the Muslim historical, have continued to reinforce this nostalgia, instilling a sense of loss for the mellifluous language of the *begams* and *nawābs* who so frequently appear on screen.

In the city of Mumbai, the center of the Indian economy, a number of amateur groups have recently been organized for the promotion of Urdu that appeal to the middle and upper-class youth of the city. Prithvi Theatre, located in a scenic suburban setting near Juhu Beach, is home to one such group. The group Mehfil@Prithvi is dedicated specifically to Urdu. Their mission statement online evokes nostalgic devotion as it likens the Urdu language to the Beloved:

Mehfil is the Urdu word for a gathering, and at Prithvi Theatre, it is coming home as a gathering of those who have loved, are starting to love, or want to fall in love with Urdu—where one can discover and celebrate the language and its literature. There was a time when the common spoken language was Hindustani, and there was no barbed wire fencing off Urdu from Hindi. Some of our best-loved writers and musicians have used the language to create what we claim as our popular cultural legacy. Few of us have remained untouched by it and we continue to soak in the magic of its poetry through Sufi music, romantic ghazals, qawwalis, or old film dialogues. A sprinkling of Urdu still softens our lips as we hum a popular film song, so what if we don't know our *zulf* [side lock] from our *gesu* [tress], or the different meanings contained in the word *sanam* [idol]? We do want to know, however, and Mehfil@Prithvi hopes to turn into a space where people can appreciate the language and its literature, where Urdu becomes more accessible to people of all ages. Mehfil@Prithvi will gather once a month at the Prithvi Adda and will discuss all things Urdu, ranging from the war-camps and bazaars that

62 Mirzā Ja'far Husain, *Qadīm Lakhna'ū kī ākhīrī bahār* (New Delhi: Taraqqī-e Urdū Bureau, 1981), 7–8. This passage is discussed in C. M. Naim, “Interrogating ‘the East,’ ‘Culture,’ and ‘Loss’ in Abdul Halim Sharar’s *Guzashta Lakhna’u*,” in *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition*, ed. Alka Patel and Karen Isaksen Leonard, Brill’s Indological Library 38 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 189–204.

gave birth to the language, – to Gulzar. We will try to pronounce the *ghs* and the *khs*, and we will meet singers, poets and lyricists who have carried this beautiful language into a slightly bewildered new millennium.⁶³

Joining Mehfil is likened to a homecoming, a natural return from post-Partition, post-Liberalization India—“a slightly bewildered millennium”—to a time in which poetry was magical. Clarifying that this group aims to create “a space ... where Urdu becomes more accessible to people of all ages” signals a youthful critique of the older generation’s inability to pass on the heritage of Urdu to younger Indians. The enumeration of the guttural consonants that characterize learned Urdu, absent from everyday Hindi pronunciation, indicates familiarity and know-how, as well as a sense of pleasure in the audible performance of difference. Referring to two different words used to describe hair, as well as the various meanings of the Urdu word for idol, specifically points to a poetic heritage of terms that has remained familiar to many Indians through the language of film music. The nostalgia and longing for Urdu as at once embodying a cosmopolitan past and a possibility of an alternative Indian secularism is evoked through the connection of Urdu with a time without “barbed-wire fences” between languages and indeed communities.

Another Mumbai-based group, *Urduwallahs*, maintains a website listing Urdu-related events in Bombay and holds monthly meetings to discuss Urdu authors. On their website, the two founders—Arwa Mamaji and Priya Nijhara—describe their discovery of Urdu, which took them through the “vintage back alleys of history,” something they describe as another “universe, which we never knew existed and wanted to cuddle in its arms, we hoped to submerge ourselves in the meaning of what we had unearthed.” Despite the fact that they “do not claim to be

63 “Mehfil@Prithvi,” accessed September 8, 2013, <http://www.prithvitheatre.org/mehfil.php>.

maestros of the Urdu language.”—in fact, they write that they have only learned the “basics of the Urdu language,” they describe their passion as an “addiction.” For these groups, learning to read Urdu is not learning a living language—the Urduwallahs even write: “We are drawn to Urdu like vultures are drawn to their prey.”⁶⁴ They here portray themselves as consumers, feasting on the dead corpse of Urdu. While their choice of metaphor may be distasteful, as Chughtai recounted, Urdu had already been declared dead during her lifetime. Using metaphors of archaeological discovery, addiction, and scavenging evokes a total sensory submersion into the past “universe” that Urdu has come to embody.

Naseeruddin Shah, a famed Indian film actor and one of the most prominent revivalists of Urdu literary forms in the contemporary public sphere, has contributed to a specific revival of the work of Chughtai. Shah is involved in a number of productions by his dramatic troupe Motley that focus on the “Indo-Muslim,” from traditional story recitation (*dāstān-go’ī*) to performances of plays based on the life and work of Chughtai and Manto. Over the course of the last decade, Naseeruddin Shah has produced three plays relating to the life and works of Chughtai. His first play, entitled *Manṭo Iṣmat Hāẓir Hain* (Manto and Ismat are Present) begins with a dramatic recitation of Manto’s short stories, “Bū” (Odor) and “Ṭīṭvāl kā kuttā” (The Dog of Titwal), followed by a recitation of Chughtai’s “Liḥāf” and concluding with a one-act play treating the obscenity trials of Chughtai and Manto. The play’s great critical and popular success and led Shah to produce a second play composed exclusively of Chughtai’s stories, entitled *Iṣmat Āpā ke Nām*, “In the Name of Ismat Apa”. In 2014, Shah presented a third play entitled *Iṣmat Āpā ke Nām 2*, drawing upon the popularity of the previous iteration of Chughtai’s performances.

During the course of my research for this project in India in 2013, I attended a

64 Arwa Mamaji and Priya Nijhara, “About Us,” *Urduwallahs*, accessed September 8, 2013, <http://urduwallahs.wordpress.com/about/>.

performance of Shah's play, *ʿIṣmat Āpā ke Nām*, and afterwards conducted an interview with Shah to discuss his interest in Chughtai's work. When I asked Shah about his earliest experiences with Chughtai, he told me, "I had heard her name ever since I was a child spoken by my family in a very dismissive manner. She was considered a writer of smut." As we have seen, this was a reputation that followed Chughtai since the publication of her story, "Liḥāf." As a young man, Shah met Chughtai on the set of the film *Junoon* in 1978, and formed a friendly, even familial relationship with her. But it was only after she died in 1991 that Shah read any of her work. He first came across a book of her stories in English translation, *Lifting the Veil*, translated by M. Asaddudin.⁶⁵ After finishing the collection of translated stories, he began to read them in Urdu transliterated in Devanagari characters. Like many Muslims in India today, Shah, who was educated in English and Hindi, prefers to read Urdu in Devanagari script,⁶⁶ and as we have discussed above, this is the way Chughtai's works are often accessed in contemporary India. Despite the criticism that Progressive Writers have received in advocating for the adoption of Devanagari,⁶⁷ readers such as Shah appear to justify the claims made by

65 Ismat Chughtai, *Lifting the Veil: Selected Writings of Ismat Chughtai*, trans. M. Asaduddin (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001).

66 On the contemporary phenomenon of writing Urdu in Devanagari, see Rizwan Ahmad, "Urdu in Devanagari: Shifting Orthographic Practices and Muslim Identity in Delhi," *Language in Society* 40, no. 3 (2011): 259–84. Ahmad writes that this practice continues to meet with resistance from the Urdu-educated elite. He records an interview which he conducted with a retired professor of Urdu in Delhi, in which the professor tells Ahmad that when he saw a pilgrim reading his prayers in Devanagari script on Ḥajj pilgrimage, he felt like shouting "*allāh kī la'nat ho tum par*" ("May the curse of God be upon you!") Ibid., 265.

67 For instance, regarding the campaign to adopt Devanagari script, the leading contemporary Indian Urdu literary critic Shamsur Rehman Faruqi has said, "Thank God, this ill-conceived campaign didn't succeeded (*sic*) and was completely annihilated by Urduwallahs." Ather Farouqi, "The Problem of Urdu in India—Political or Existential? An Interview with S. R. Faruqi," trans. Muhammad Umar Memon, *Annual of Urdu Studies* 10 (1995): 159.

Chughtai and Progressive Writers like Sajjad Zaheer that the translation and transliteration of Urdu literature is of paramount importance to its continued viability in India.

‘Iṣmat Āpā ke Nām is very much a family affair for Shah, starting with the very title of the production, where Chughtai is referred to as “Ismat Āpā,” or elder sister Ismat. His wife Ratna Pathak Shah and daughter Heeba Shah perform in the play with him. In our interview he stated directly, “She’s talking about my family.” The play recreates for his audience Shah’s own introduction to Chughtai’s work by presenting the first three stories he read by Chughtai, namely “Chhū’ī Mū’ī” (A Delicate Woman, lit., the Touch-Me-Not Plant),⁶⁸ “Mūghal Bachcha” (Mughal Child),⁶⁹ and “Gharwālī” (The Homemaker).⁷⁰ Couched in a language of familiarity,

68 “Chhū’ī-Mū’ī” was performed by the actress Heeba Shah, who is also Naseeruddin Shah’s daughter. The story is an exploration of social class, maternity and womanhood through a childbirth witnessed by three upper class women in a train compartment, one of whom is herself pregnant. This woman, who has experienced previous miscarriages, is shocked by the apparent ease with which the lower-class itinerant woman is able to deliver her own child by herself, clean up after her birth, and leave. In fact this pregnant woman is so shocked that she experiences another miscarriage shortly after witnessing this event. In this story, Chughtai critiques the economically dominant classes in society for their detachment from the realities of life and indeed their displaced sense of superiority. Whereas the wealthy woman cannot carry a child to term, the itinerant woman does so with ease.

69 “Mūghal Bachcha” was performed by actress Ratna Pathak Shah, who is also Naseeruddin Shah’s wife. The story explores the decline of the North Indian landed gentry of Uttar Pradesh through the love story of Gorī Bī’ and Kāle Miyān (lit. “Lady White” and “Lord Black”). The story is a satire of the prideful Mughal nobleman, whose arrogance prevents him from fulfilling his day-to-day duties. Kāle Miyān is mocked for his dark skin, while his wife Gorī Bī is praised for her beauty and fairness. On their wedding night, rather than lifting Gorī Bī’s veil, Kāle Miyān commands Gorī Bī to lift her own veil in an attempt to express his dominance in the relationship. When Gorī Bī does nothing, Kāle Miyān storms out and fails to consummate the marriage, the couple never fulfills their marriage vows.

70 ‘Gharwālī’ was performed by Naseeruddin Shah. The story is a satire on the institution of marriage and a celebration of female sexuality through the relationship of Mirzā and Lajjo. In this story Lajjo is perfectly happy as the servant/lover of Mirzā. She is able to manage a household of her own without any limitations. Due to his growing jealousy, Mirzā insists on a *nikāḥ* (Muslim marriage contract) to make her his official wife. After

Shah found in Chughtai a way to recuperate a history of his own left-leaning progressive social thought within the Indian intellectual tradition.

In the performance of *‘Iṣmat Āpā ke Nām*, the stories themselves are told and enacted by a single narrator, who recites the text of the short story verbatim. In choosing to perform Chughtai’s stories as dramatic recitations, rather than staged enactments, Shah draws on the tradition of *dāstān-go’ī* (traditional story-telling),⁷¹ relying on gestures, intonation, and facial expression rather than on props, staging, and visual elements. According to Shah, it is Chughtai’s skill in conveying dialogue that makes Chughtai’s work, in his words, “so utterly performable.” He explained, “To me theater is a one-on-one contact [...] I came across a statement something she’d said somewhere, ‘When I write a story, I feel as though I am speaking to someone.’”⁷² Going back to the frequent refrain that Chughtai’s style is conversational and not bookish, the significance of conversation lies in the nostalgia for the way of life of an ambiguously Muslim past that her work embodies.

As for the mode of performance, Shah described his decision that

we have to do these stories without any ornamentation, without anything extraneous, without anything decorative on stage. In fact, I just thought I’d have a *takht* [a raised platform for sitting, sleeping, and reclining], which is a feature of every UP Muslim household. We had to spend six months each memorizing the stories and we’ve memorized them exactly as they’ve been written. We haven’t added or subtracted anything.

the marriage is solemnized, Mirzā’s attitude and treatment of Lajjo deteriorates. He insists she dress conservatively and starts spending time with courtesans. After he finds her with another man, he divorces her. After some time they reconcile and Lajjo is once again relieved to be back to her unlegislated role as homemaker.

71 On the revival of *dāstān-go’ī* in contemporary India, see Mahmood Farooqui, “Dastangoi: Revival of the Mughal Art of Storytelling,” *Context: Journal of the Development and Research Organisation for Nature, Arts and Heritage* 8, no. 2 (2011): 31–36.

72 *Jab main kahānī likhtī hūn mujhe lagtā hai main kisī se bāteṅ kar rahi hūn.*

Shah sees himself and his performers as conveying Chughtai's stories authentically, creating as little distraction as possible from her words. Running counter to traditional theatrical performance, of which a major point is in the interpretation, Shah seems to be striving for no interpretation, which is an interpretation of its own. For a theater production to refuse to engage artistically with a "script" borders on an almost religious veneration of the text. By suspending the work as timeless, it becomes a relic of an ambiguous past.

Evoking the nostalgia for his own childhood growing up in a North Indian Muslim family, Shah describes the staging of the stories:

There were some memories of my own childhood, which have stayed with me, which I just wanted to reproduce for no particular reason, just nostalgia.... For example I can recall lying in my mosquito net in the *ṣaḥan* [courtyard] and my mother doing her *namāz* [prayer] on the *takht* and one bulb, one naked bulb just hanging there, and I used to see this every night. So I just brought that in.

Shah readily admitted that nostalgia plays a large part in his connection to Chughtai's work. Therefore, despite his claims to faithfully transmit the spirit of Chughtai's stories, he does reimagine her work within his own memories and experiences. Perhaps it is the attempted lack of interpretation and bareness of the stage that particularly evokes and invites the audience to make Chughtai's stories their own as Shah has—like a blank slate, Chughtai's stories can fit any past, any experience.

For Shah, there is a direct connection between the use of Urdu and nostalgia for an Islamicate Indian past. I asked Shah why it was that in addition to enjoying her stories as stories, he had decided to produce them into theatrical performances, to which he replied, "First of all because I wanted very badly to do a play in Urdu. Motley had done only English productions before that. French plays, Italian plays [...] but never an Indian playwright. My fascination was for Western drama." Shah went on to explain that he decided to perform Chughtai's stories

because, “I just felt this need arising within me to do something in my own language—to get across to a different audience.” The fact that Shah identifies Urdu as his own language is significant, especially considering that his exposure to Chughtai began through English and Hindi translations. In effect, Chughtai is carrying the cultural weight of Urdu into the contemporary age. As Chughtai had observed, Urdu remains alive as a spoken language even as literacy declines, creating a perceptible sense of loss and nostalgia in those who lay claim to its heritage. In addition to the language the characters spoke, Shah claims, “I know these people, I’m telling you I know these people she’s talking about me, she’s talking about my family.”⁷³

Motley’s performances of Chughtai’s material continue to sell out theatres in India and abroad, even though many of the attendees do not fully understand the vocabulary of the performance. At the show I attended, one attendee asked another, “I’m really enjoying the show, are you?” to which she responded said, “Yes, but how much of that did you understand?” The first replied, “About 40%.” Speaking about this problem, the founder of the *dāstān-go’ī* revival in India, Mahmood Farouqui, writes,

As a general rule, people who know Urdu do not come to the theatre and those who come to the theatre do not know Urdu. [...] We are asserting Urdu’s right to be and giving the audience a taste of a language that has been eroded, marginalised and even emasculated. We want to assert that this is a beautiful language; if you don’t understand, it is your loss. It is the creation of a politics of longing for a language.⁷⁴

Particularly striking is the claim the Urdu has been “emasculated.” Such terminology evokes colonial portrayals of the “manly Englishman” and “effeminate Native” that associated power

73 Likewise, among the packed audience attending the play, Chughtai’s stories had resonance. One attendee, Deepika Khatri, claimed that the “stories resonated, particularly [their] sexual dynamics.”

74 Farooqui, “Dastangoi: Revival of the Mughal Art of Storytelling,” 34.

and efficacy with English.⁷⁵ This revival is then a form of rescue for a language perceived to be in decline because of its abandonment by the Indian state. It is a renewal of a thoroughly Indian Urdu. Such devotion to Urdu, even among those who comprehend it only imperfectly, is indeed striking, and powerfully reflects the longing for the Indo-Muslim secular heritage that Urdu had come to embody. Indeed, such nostalgia can be found across India and is especially reflected in the world of cinema. Yet, the fact that it is a woman's work that restores the dignity of this emasculated language must also be duly noted.

In the recent Hindi comedic film *Derh 'Ishqiya* (*Dedh Ishqiya*, lit. Romance Version 1.5, 2014), a pair of North Indian Muslim con artists plan a scam. The recently-widowed Begam (played by Madhuri Dixit) of the fictional city Mahmudabad is holding a poetic gathering, a *mushā'ira*, to determine who will become her next husband and inherit the title of Nawāb of Mahmudabad. One of the con-men, Iftikhār (Naseeruddin Shah), affectionately known as Khālujān (Dear Uncle) by his sidekick Babban (Arshad Warsi), poses as a refined Nawāb of a town called Chandpur. The guise of a Nawab, an upper-class Muslim noble, is marked by Iftikhār's Persian lamb cap (*karākul*), facial hair, and *sherwānī*, depicting a film trope of the Urdu poet as the hero in an indeterminate Indian past (Figure 4.4).

75 See Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*.



Figure 4.4

Iftikhār (Naseeruddin Shah) recites poetry at a *Mushā'ira*, impersonating a Nawāb.

Iftikḥār enters the contest, reciting a poem (*naẓm*) entitled *Zabān Jale Hai* (The tongue burns).⁷⁶

na bolūn main to kaleja phūnke
jo bol dūn to zabān jale hai
If I say it not, my heart is set aflame
if I do, my tongue burns.

sulag na jāve agar sune vuh
jo bāt merī zabān tale hai
May she not burn if she hears
the words held back by my tongue.

lage to phir yūn ke rog lāge
na sāns āve na sāns jāve
If it strikes, it feels like a sickness.
Breath neither comes to you nor leaves.

yih 'ishq hai namurād aisā
ki jān leve tabhī tale hai
This love is so hopeless
that it departs only when it has taken your life.

hamārī ḥālat pe kittā rove
hai, āsmān bhī tu dekh lījo
Look at how even the sky
cries at our state!

ki surkh ho jā'eñ us kī āñkhen
bhī jaise jaise yih dīn dhale hai
That its eyes are reddened
as this day slowly fades away.

While the poem may be seen as a typical example of Urdu *naẓm*, expressing the state of the lover longing for his beloved, given the context of the poem in the film, one might equally interpret the Beloved of the poem to be the Urdu language itself. Employing archaizing grammar (*jale hai* for *jaltī hai*), the poem begins by focusing on words which when kept silent inflame the heart in longing, when uttered sear the tongue in passion. Like the “addiction” of the *Urduwallahs* above,

76 A poem composed by Urdu poet and lyricist Gulzar for the film.

the love is described as a sickness, a hopeless cause, as it fades away into the night.

Since the beginning of “talkie” Hindi films in the 1930s, Urdu writers have formed a significant part of the Hindi film industry. Even prior to the introduction of sound films, the so-called “Muslim social” genre of film has enjoyed particular popularity in Indian cinema. One of the earliest examples of this desire to document and explore Muslim social life as a distinct object of cinematic consumption can be found in a 1942 review in the magazine *Filmindia* praising the film *Ma‘ṣūm* (*Masoom*, lit. The Innocent One, 1941) for showing “how our Muslims lived behind their veils.”⁷⁷ Many of the most memorable films of the last seventy years of Hindi cinema have been set in nostalgic, North Indian Muslim settings. Stock characters such as lascivious *nawābs* [noblemen], virtuous *begams* [ladies], and tragic *ṭavā’ifs* [courtesans] are instantly recognizable to a film audience, as are the palatial *havelīs* of cities like Lucknow, with their *mushā‘iras* and *baiṭhaks* [poetic gatherings]. *Deṛh ‘Ishqiya* creatively channels this nostalgic atmosphere to comic effect, subverting the character of the *nawāb* into a con, the topos of the *mushā‘ira* into a caper, all the while paying tribute to the historical survival of Urdu in spoken forms through Hindi cinema.

The plot of *Deṛh ‘Ishqiya* is itself an homage to Chughtai’s work. The relationship between Begam Pārā and Munniyā presents a rather simplified version of Chughtai’s famed characters Begam Jān and Rubbū for a cinematic audience. At the end of the film, it is the conmen who are conned as Begam Pārā is in fact using them as a convenient excuse to escape from her bankruptcy with her lover, her maid Munniyā (Huma Qureshi). Pārā fakes her own kidnapping, while taking Iftikhār and his accomplice Babban captive. As Iftikhār and Babban sit in shackles against a stone wall, they realize that Pārā and Munniyā are lovers. The mistress and

77 *Filmindia* July 1942: 55, cited in Bhaskar and Allen, *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, 65.

maid embrace at the success of their scheme, while Iftikhār, gazing at them longingly, remarks wryly to Babban, “It’s getting cold...how about asking them for a quilt” (*thand lag rahī hai...liḥāf māṅg le*). The two burst into laughter at the literary reference, as shadows of the two lovers are cast on the wall behind Iftikhār (Figure 4.5). The *liḥāf* that Iftikhār has in mind is of course Chughtai’s short story “Liḥāf,” and the shadows themselves are an allusion to the shadows that Chughtai’s narrator describes as seeing thrown on the walls from Begam Jān’s quilt. “Liḥāf” has become part of the film’s nostalgic vernacular. In part thanks to efforts of activists and intellectuals like Chughtai herself, same sex desire is becoming increasingly accepted in Indian society, and the Begam and Munniyā are able to escape with the help of Iftikhār and Babban to a place where they can live their relationship openly.

As a film, *Derh ‘Ishqiya* is a paean to genre of film termed “the Muslim social” and the poetic language that filled it. The film is intensely nostalgic for the Indo-Muslim past as manifested by an abundance of cues including dress, setting, language, poetry. From the moment Iftikhār and Babban enter the Begam’s court, the viewers find themselves in a space evoking a bygone era. Yet the film embraces rather than denies the anachronistic conflicts that this nostalgia produces in the playful back and forth between enacting their *nawābī* roles in the poetic challenge and riding motorcycles for quick escapes. This chameleon-like nature of the characters also allows the viewers to partake in the fantasy. Through the protagonist, Iftikhār, who though a petty conman in his daily life dreams of the life of a *nawāb* in a court far away from the day-to-day realities of modern India, the film speaks to an audience disenchanted with contemporary India, nostalgic for a by-gone age and its strange-yet-familiar language. Urdu is the door to a past this is more idyllic and more fluid with sexual and romantic possibility.

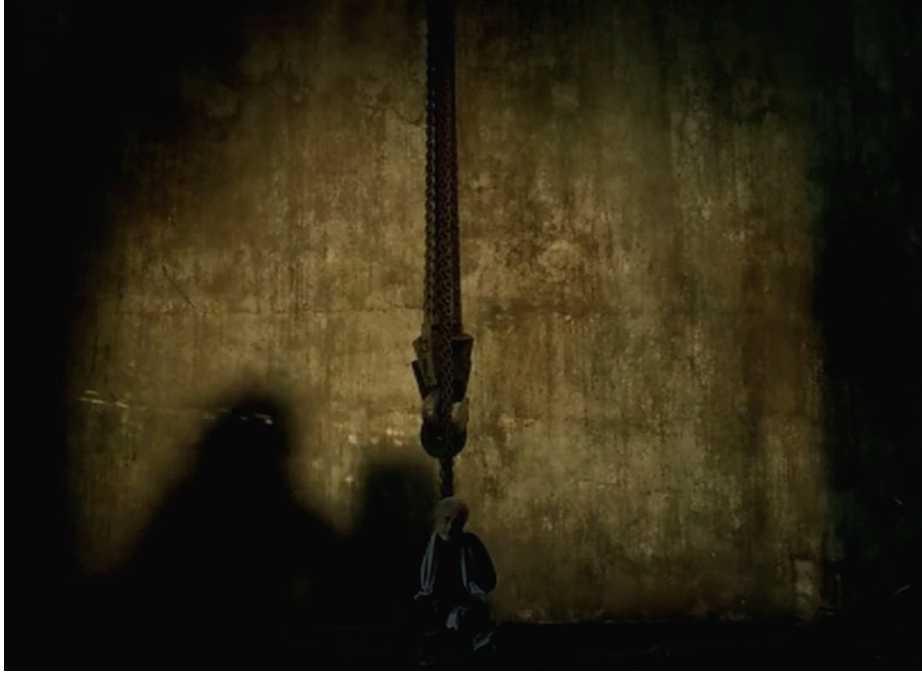


Figure 4.5:

Iftikhār sits chained in a train car as the shadows of the amorous embrace of Begam Para (Madhuri Dixit) and Munniyā (Huma Qureshi) are cast on the wall behind.

Conclusion

In a 2001 review of *Lifting the Veil*, the volume of English translations that first exposed Naseeruddin Shah to the writings of Chughtai, Suparna Gupta writes that the stories “are like coming home. There is a familiar quality to them—a feeling you get when you look at frayed, leather-bound photo albums. You can see clearly how the past structures the present. And in this new translation of selected short stories, you witness how women like Chughtai were the precursors of women’s equality.”⁷⁸ In this nostalgic description, the album of Chughtai’s work is worn by repeated viewing, which speaks to affection in the present and yet is also symbolic of a longed-for past.

This chapter has explored the role of Urdu language and literature in independent India through the lens of Chughtai’s context, work, and legacy. I have argued that as part of their campaign for a secular India, Progressive Writers such as Chughtai sought to release Urdu from the imposition of communalist limits by advocating its use as a national language and later to write Urdu in Devanagari script. As we have seen, by the peak of Chughtai’s career in the mid-twentieth century, she saw the legacy of Urdu literature in India as lying primarily in transliteration, translation, film, and music, through which the rich literary heritage could be conveyed to a cosmopolitan audience. This presaged contemporary nostalgia for the Urdu language and the Indo-Muslim past it embodies, reflected in films like *Derh ‘Ishqiya*, in groups like *Urduwallahs* and *Mehfil@Prithvi*, and in the theatrical performances of her stories produced by Naseeruddin Shah and the Motley theater group. Literary critic Aamir Mufti has written of the exilic elements of Urdu literary history, arguing, as discussed above, that “Urdu remains,

78 Suparna Gupta, “ElleNOW Books: Lifting the Veil by Ismat Chughtai,” *Elle India*, November 2001, 48.

fundamentally, a homeless literature.”⁷⁹ Though contestation and conflict are woven into the modern history of the language, Urdu, as part of a secular national imaginary, continues to have a home in India through the work and memory of Ismat Chughtai.

Conclusion: Can the Indo-Muslim Be Secular?

The Muslims of India in fact face what is a radically new and profound problem; namely, how to live with others as equals. This is unprecedented; it has never arisen before in the whole history of Islam. It raises the deepest issues both of the meaning of man's being and of social morality. It raises the relation to other peoples' faith. Yet it is a question on which the past expressions and doctrines of Islam offer no immediate guidance.¹

The above diagnosis from scholar of comparative religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith provides some compelling examples of the kinds of questions that faced Indian Muslims in the mid-twentieth century. In this dissertation, I have argued that Urdu writer and cultural critic Ismat Chughtai's life, work, and legacy provide profound insights into the diverse ways Indian Muslim intellectuals, particularly those belonging to the Progressive Writers' Association, faced the pressing questions of modernity. Chughtai has enjoyed tremendous popularity in India and abroad. Yet, her use of religious idioms is rarely studied, and the way her work speaks to the relation of religion, autonomy, education, and language have not been addressed. I argue that while Chughtai regularly invoked religious identities and traditions in her writing, for her, religion belonged in the private sphere, behind a public identity as an Indian, governed by a humanist morality that allowed all Indians to participate as autonomous subjects without communal limitations. This was at odds with other Indian Muslims for whom religious identity was primary, particularly in light of the pressures on the community after Partition. Through her fiction, essays, films, and interviews, Chughtai advocated for an ideal of social justice that underscored the interrelatedness of sexual and economic injustice. As her literary celebrity grew, Chughtai constructed for herself an authorial persona which stood in stark contrast to the notion

1 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 289.

Conclusion

of the “ideal Eastern wife”—a fiercely independent woman for whom a life of education, reading, and writing held the key to a liberation of the self. Finally, I have argued that early aspirations of bridging the Hindi-Urdu divide through a national language lived on in Chughtai’s thoughts on the future of Urdu in India. Ultimately, a continuing attachment to Urdu language has given rise to an intense longing for the secular possibilities that it has come to represent, possibilities which are exemplified by the writing of Chughtai.

While the question of the secular is crucial to the study of Islam and Muslim societies in the modern world, formulations of the secular by thinkers from Muslim backgrounds have until now lain outside the purview of Indo-Muslim studies. While Indo-Muslim studies as a field has celebrated religious tolerance in pre-modern Indian Islam, in the modern period, its subjects of study are often restricted specifically to religious thinkers like the Islamic reformers whose agendas are discussed in this dissertation. Ultimately, in the study of Indo-Muslim culture, there has been a tendency to highlight the voices of some sort of religious authority—the ‘Ulamā, the Sufis, people who claim religious or spiritual authority. The story of Muslims is told through this lens. What would the picture look like if we were to tell the story of Indo-Muslim culture by looking at authorities of a different sort altogether?

In their introduction to the 2012 volume *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition*, editors Alka Patel and Karen Leonard write about the meaning and boundaries of Indo-Muslim cultural studies. Their choice to use the term “transition” rather than the too frequently used “decline” to describe expressions of Indo-Muslim culture in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and beyond is informed by their argument that “transformed Indo-Muslim cultural expressions have

Conclusion

survived in fluid but recognizable forms into the present day.”² Various hallmarks of Indo-Muslim culture have undergone metamorphosis in the modern period. Failing to examine these changes and new forms of expression limits scholarly exploration of the possibilities for Indo-Muslim culture in the twentieth and indeed twenty-first centuries.

Patel and Leonard also address the term “Indo-Muslim” itself:

Choosing ‘Indo-Muslim’ rather than ‘Indo-Persian’, for example, recognizes the declining use of Persian over time, and the transformation of Muslim civilization into a recognizably South Asian cultural formation. Indeed, the contributions in this volume highlight India’s unique engagement with Muslim and Persianate cultural forms. Collectively the word demonstrates the disadvantages of a center-periphery hierarchy espoused in some previous works, which implied that unchanging stability of a central Muslim ‘self’ with others as peripheral and inadequate reflections of this center. The unequivocal Indian location of this volume allows for in-depth examination of multiple, regionally specific cultural negotiations, showing that Indo-Muslim cultures are worthy of study in their own right, rather than derivative from—and thereby implicitly subordinate to—imported and imposed traditions.³

Resisting the center-periphery model within the field of Islamic Studies is an important goal. However, the editors do not address the boundaries of what can be considered a “recognizably South Asian cultural form” nor what constitutes “Muslim civilization,” the two central aspects of defining the Indo-Muslim. As discussed in the introduction and first chapter of this dissertation, the meaning and authenticity of claims of Muslimness are thorny questions within the field of cultural studies more broadly.

As it is, the field of Indo-Muslim studies defines itself with regard to South Asia through the paradoxical juxtaposition of cultural sameness (Indian) and cultural difference (Muslim). This differentiation between Muslims and others is indeed at the very origins of Indo-Muslim

2 Alka Patel and Karen Leonard, “Introduction,” in *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 2.

3 Alka Patel and Karen Leonard, “Introduction,” in *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 4.

Conclusion

cultural studies, a field that is intricately linked with Harvard University's own institutional history. Harvard was the first institution to focus on studies of Muslim societies in South Asia. Indo-Muslim Culture was established as a program of study at Harvard during the mid-1960s partially due to a windfall of funding that was then directed into this field by such figures as Wilfred Cantwell Smith⁴ and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.⁵ The estate of Ataullah K. Ozai-Durrani, the Afghan-American inventor of Minute Rice, provided the initial bequest "as a memorial to his

4 Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) was a prominent scholar of Islam and comparative religion. Smith initially went to India to support the independence movement while ostensibly conducting his dissertation research and teaching Islamic history for the Canadian Overseas Mission Council at Foreman Christian College in Lahore. His dissertation focused on modern Islam in India and was premised on a Marxist analysis of religious identity. According to Rosemary R. Hicks, his opinion of religion and mysticism changed drastically after World War II, when, as Hicks writes, "he learned of Nazi-Communist collaboration in Germany, of the actions of Stalinist forces in Spain, and (from his brother, Arnold, then the Canadian ambassador to the Soviet Union) of the gulag and Siberian camps." Smith's first dissertation was rejected by Cambridge, though it was later published in book form as *Modern Islam in India*. After this failure at Cambridge, Smith joined the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton for masters and PhD degrees. Rosemary R. Hicks, "Comparative Religion and the Cold War Transformation of Indo-Persian 'Mysticism' into Liberal Islamic Modernity," in *Secularism and Religion Making*, ed. Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 146.

5 Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) is a prominent scholar of Islamic studies. "Raised partly in McCarthy's America and disillusioned by his studies at MIT and Harvard, Nasr found solace in a private Boston library in the 1950s. Here he encountered English-, French-, and German-language works on antimodern Traditionalism and Perennialism (loosely: a neo-Platonic philosophy according to which all religions express one primordial truth). Initially interested in neo-Vedantic theosophy, Nasr also discovered early twentieth-century Europeans' writings on Indo-Persian traditions and Islamic mysticism. As Nasr recounts, he had thus 'been guided by the grace of Heaven to the eternal *sophia* of which Islamic wisdom is one of the most universal and vital embodiments.' Despite his proclaimed anti-modernism, Nasr became part of Smith's modernizing network. These interlinking politics of mysticism and modernization illuminate how contemporary, and sometimes contradictory, notions of 'moderate' liberal mysticism came to characterize US policy and popular culture." Ibid., 153.

Conclusion

friend, Syud Hossain, India's first ambassador to Egypt.”⁶ As reported by the *New York Times* on June 19, 1964, “under his will, the bequest is to go to Harvard University or some ‘such nonprofit institution’ for the translation into English of the works of the poets Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib and Meer Taqui Meer.”⁷ While the bequest seemed to be intended for a large-scale translation project, there remained confusion about the most basic facts of the project—Ozai-Durrani’s lawyers were not sure in what language *Ghālib* and *Mīr* wrote, and Professor Ehsan Yarshater, quoted in the *Times* article, remarked that *Ghālib* and *Mīr* are not significant to Persian but since they lived in what is now Pakistan (which is incorrect), they are significant to Pakistan. By emphasizing what he believed to be their peripheral nature, Yarshater at once distances them from what he perceived to be the center of Persian literature, Iran, and also from India, where both poets had spent their entire lives. The librarian at the Indian consulate also expressed a similarly anachronistic and religiously bound nationalization of the poets Ghalib and Mir by informing the (assumed-to-be-ignorant) journalist: “it was really a matter for the Pakistanis.”⁸ The ignorance of both a scholar of Persian literature as well as a cultural officer at the Indian consulate indeed provide strong evidence for the need to produce scholarship about Indo-Muslim culture. In an era when historical amnesia and indeed ignorance, would link Islam in South Asia only to Pakistan, the very term Indo-Muslim consequentially questioned this simple, nation-based, understanding of religion in South Asia.

At Harvard, the interests of certain influential scholars had a long-lasting impact on using the resources provided for the translation project into establishing a new field of study. When

6 Joseph Lelyveld, “Inventor Leaves Half Million for Translation of 2 Persian Poets,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 1964.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

Conclusion

questioned about the Ozai-Durrani bequest, Richard N. Frye, then Aga Khan Professor of Iranian at Harvard, expressed his opinion that a position in Indo-Persian studies should be established, and that for this position, Harvard ought to recruit a scholar skilled in both Persian and Urdu.⁹ According to Frye, “It would take more than a lifetime [...] to properly translate and edit the works of these poets” and the research supported by the bequest should “be related to the rest of Persian literature and to the lives and times of the two poets.”¹⁰ Note that Frye’s comments made no mention of Islam. Ultimately, however, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, then director of Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR), convinced decision makers at Harvard to use the funds to hire Annemarie Schimmel¹¹ for a position in Indo-Muslim cultural studies.¹² Smith was advised to recruit Schimmel by his colleague Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who served as visiting faculty at the CSWR on multiple occasions. The legacy of these scholars continues to influence the field today.

Of primary interest for the project at hand are the views of the foundational scholars of Indo-Muslim Studies regarding the possible overlap between ideas of secular and Muslim

9 Harrison Young, “Harvard May Get Minute Rice Bequest,” *The Harvard Crimson*, accessed July 23, 2014, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1776/1/22/harvard-may-get-minute-rice-bequest/>.

10 Ibid.

11 Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003) was a prominent scholar of Islam and Sufism. “Both Nasr and Schimmel elaborated on the works of [Henry] Corbin and Sufi Perennialist Frithjof Schuon and served with other Traditionalist scholars on the editorial board of *Fons Vitae*, a publishing house dedicated to disseminating works on idealist philosophy, Sufism, and the essential commonality of all religions. During that time, Schimmel also wrote the preface for an American edition of Schuon’s *Understanding Islam*, in which she compared Schuon’s work with ‘the beautiful lines of the Indo-Muslim poet philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal.” Hicks, “Comparative Religion and the Cold War Transformation of Indo-Persian ‘Mysticism’ into Liberal Islamic Modernity,” 159.

12 Ibid., 157.

Conclusion

societies. In *Islam in Modern History*, Smith writes, “The Muslim segment of human society can flourish only if Islam is strong and vital”¹³ and “liberalism and humanism in the Muslim world, if they are to flourish at all, may perhaps be Islamic liberalism and Islamic humanism.”¹⁴ In Smith’s view, Muslims could only embrace modernity on Islamic terms, not through Western (i.e. non-Muslim) ideas. According to Rosemary R. Hicks, Smith spent his career establishing “programs for liberalizing ostensibly static Islamic law by infusing it with the creative impulses of Eastern mysticism” since he “believed that liberal education would equip Muslim intellectuals to produce indigenous reform.”¹⁵ This fundamental privileging of the mystical tradition within Islam whose truest forms developed in the Persian and Indian contexts is also echoed in the work of Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Annemarie Schimmel, two of the most prominent scholars of Islam in the twentieth century.

In 1965, Schimmel joined the Harvard faculty as the first chair of Indo-Muslim culture. Though Schimmel wrote extensively on Islam in South Asia, her most celebrated book was *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (1975).¹⁶ Schimmel’s approach to South Asian Islam had two major components. On the one hand, she specialized in the study of Classical Urdu literature, culminating in a major study on the life and thought of Muḥammad Iqbal.¹⁷ In this vein,

13 Smith, *Islam in Modern History*, 305.

14 Ibid., 303.

15 Hicks, “Comparative Religion and the Cold War Transformation of Indo-Persian ‘Mysticism’ into Liberal Islamic Modernity,” 147. Note: A corrected version is available online at:
https://www.academia.edu/4129815/Comparative_Religion_and_the_Cold_War_Transformation_of_Indo-Persian_Mysticism_into_Liberal_Islamic_Modernity

16 Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

17 Schimmel, *Gabriel’s Wing* (first edition 1963).

Conclusion

Schimmel later focused on the legacy of Iqbāl among Indo-Muslim mystical reform movements.¹⁸ Elsewhere, Schimmel shifted the focus away from the hegemony of Urdu literature—notably, her work brought the voices of the folk and vernacular traditions of Sindh to scholarly attention for the first time.¹⁹ Yet both in her approach to Urdu literature and in her approach to the traditions of Sindh, Schimmel focused on Islamic mystical thought over other forms of expression.

Yet as Akeel Bilgrami notes, Muslims are not solely defined through Islam:

For the most part, there is no reason to doubt that Muslims, even devout Muslims, will and do take their commitment to Islam not only as one among other values, but also as something which is itself differentiated internally into a number of, in principle, negotiable detailed commitments. If so, there is a pressing question that arises for anybody who comes to this subject with the motivating interest that I have declared. What are the difficulties that recent absolutist assertions or reassertions of Islamic identity pose for the prospect of transformation in Islamic social and legal *practices* [emphasis original]? Like most questions about the determinants of culture, this question can also be posed from the opposite direction: To what extent is the relative absence of such transformations among ordinary Muslims responsible for the susceptibility of Islamic polities to constant threat from powerful minority movements which would have it that Islamic identity is, for the most part, non-negotiable?²⁰

Through Chughtai's legacy, we can see the impact and reach of Indo-Muslim culture in to the present day. Like her fellow Progressive Writers, Chughtai considered herself an heir to the Islamicate humanism of the pre-colonial period, which she did not see as incompatible with her

18 See Annemarie Schimmel, "Iqbal in the Context of Indo-Muslim Mystical Reform Movements," in *Islam in Asia: South Asia*, ed. Yohanan Friedmann (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), 208–26.

19 See Annemarie Schimmel, *Sindhi Literature, A History of Indian Literature, Modern Indo-Aryan Literatures*, v. 8, pt. 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1974); Annemarie Schimmel, *Pearls from the Indus: Studies in Sindhi Culture* (Jamshoro, Pakistan: Sindhi Adabi Board, 1986).

20 Bilgrami, "Secularism: Its Content and Context," 220.

Conclusion

own socialist humanist political leanings. Throughout her life, Chughtai made frequent use of the press, by publishing short stories and serialized essays in literary magazines. As media in the new India developed, the availability of new technologies of mass dissemination like film, radio, and television, also encouraged Progressives like Chughtai to adopt their stories to the screen and to the airwaves.

Despite critics like ‘Azīz Aḥmad who castigated Chughtai by claiming “she sees only sex in every direction,”²¹ Chughtai’s treatment of sexuality was always part of her broader concern with economic and social injustice. Thus, rather than simply a celebration of alternative sexualities, the short story “Lihaf” is more importantly about the child narrator, who shares her frightening memories about “that Begam Jān, whose quilt is secure in my mind like a scar from a hot coal.”²² It is the differences in power between children and their elders, masters and servants, and husbands and wives, that is truly at the heart of the story. By inviting her readers to witness this representative social trauma through the eyes of her child narrator, Chughtai engaged in a sort of public therapy, in which society could witness its inequalities and injustices in order to address them.

Chughtai’s vision of society was propagated through her writings, in literary magazines, and in film. Women’s lack of access to economic and sexual autonomy was a particular concern for in her work. In her memoir for the column “Ghubār-e Kāravān,” she writes, “in my stories I have always lamented the economic deprivation and helplessness of women. [...] If a wife sticks to her husband only because he provides her food and shelter, then she is no less constrained than

21 *unheṇ har ṭaraf jins hī jins naẓar ātī hai*. Aḥmad, *Taraqqī pasand adab*, 126.

22 *vuhī begam jān jin kā liḥāf ab tak mere zīhn meṇ garm lohe ke dāgh kī ṭarah mahfūz hai*. ‘Iṣmat Chughtā’ī, *Choṭeṇ* (Delhi: Sāqī Buk Dīpo, 1942), 91.

Conclusion

a courtesan.”²³ To a greater extent than her peers in the Progressive Writers’ Movement, Chughtai repeatedly wrote stories that pointed to the relation between sexual and economic justice. For Chughtai’s characters, the ability to act freely in the sexual domain is predicated on economic autonomy.

A concern for human suffering is often represented by Chughtai through the story of the martyrdom of Ḥusain at Karbalā, whose suffering Chughtai referred to often in writing and interviews. Late in her career, she wrote a novel entitled *Ek Qatra-e Khūn* (*One Drop of Blood*, published in 1976). In a 1979 interview, she tells her interviewer that the backdrop for the novel was the events leading up to the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War:

I started writing this novel when the massacre was going on in Bangladesh and the Bangladeshis were fighting for their rights. I have always been interested in such struggles. Therefore I chose a historical character for my novel, one who hundreds of years ago fought for and died for human rights. This was Imam Hussain, the nephew of Prophet Mohammad. In all my stories you will find somebody fighting for his or her right to live – she might be a *ghatan* [washerwoman] or an *ayah* [nanny] from Bombay or an aristocratic lady from Aligarh. “Ek Katra Khooṅ” is really not a thematic departure for me, it is a reflection of my continued interest in the individual’s fight for freedom and dignity.²⁴

In this interview Chughtai, referred to the struggle for human rights as a universal goal, and also the goal of her seemingly most religiously oriented work. The paragon of this model was Imām Ḥusain, significantly represented in her story as a historical forerunner rather than the more typical understanding of him as a figure of devotion in religious literature.

23 *main ne apnī kahāniyon meṅ ‘aurat kī iqtisādī maḥkūmī aur majbūrī kā hamesha ronā royā hai. [...] ek bīvī shauhar se is liye chapkī rahī hai ki roṭī kapṛe kā sahārā hai to vuh ṭavā’if se kam majbūr nahīn.* Chughtā’ī, “Ghubār-e Kāravān 9: ‘Iṣmat Chughtā’ī,” 11; later reprinted in *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 27.

24 Aqil Ahmad, “Ismat Chughtai,” *Debonair*, January 1979, 12.

Conclusion

Like the paper-robed images of Ghālīb's *ghazal*, the poem that forms the title of Chughtai's series of autobiographical essays, Chughtai constructed the story of her life as a seeker of justice. Chughtai's educational endeavors, as a middle-class Muslim woman from a *sharīf* family, occurred within the wider context of reforms to women's education taking place in India during this period. As traditional forms of home-based education for girls dwindled, schools became the only possible option for most Indian Muslim families if they wished to educate their daughters. Chughtai wrote that sending daughters to school was equated by some in her extended family as tantamount to making them Christian.²⁵ While it is true that Christian missionaries established the earliest women's schools in India, missionary schools resulted in very few formal student conversions to Christianity.²⁶ Rather than a harbinger of irreligion, Chughtai argued that education was a necessary step in the cultivation of an autonomous self.

Though Chughtai identified herself and was identified by others as a Muslim, she rejected normative constructions of Islamic law and instead advocated for the implementation of a universal Indian legal code. In the wake of the Shah Bano Case (1985), which challenged the authority of the Muslim Personal Law Code (1937), Chughtai was called upon to speak about Islam and its relation to the Indian state. The relationship between individual rights and communal norms came to a head in the response to Chughtai's decision to be cremated after her death in 1991. While Chughtai wrote frequently on religious subjects, because she identified strongly with secular and humanist values, her perspectives on Islam and the role of religion has not attracted scholarly attention.

25 Chughtā'ī, *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan*, 84.

26 See Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Conclusion

In contemporary India, questions of language politics and their significance to religious communities as well as the ideals of secularism still loom large. The perspective of the Progressive Writers, of which Chughtai was one of the most prominent living examples in the 1970s and 1980s, was to secularize the language question with a common script for both the Urdu and Hindi registers of what they believed to be a shared language. While in the 1930s, Progressive Writers had pushed for the adoption of Roman script, by the 1970s Chughtai advocated for the expanded adoption of Devanagari script by writers of Urdu. I argue that these secular imaginings also influence the way in which contemporary Indian artists interpret the Indo-Muslim past and specifically embrace Chughtai as a site of nostalgic veneration.

Yet, it should be kept in mind that sentiments of nostalgia for Urdu as though it were a dead language are called into question by the fact that fifty-two million Indians identify Urdu as their mother tongue. While the dream of a national language and the secular possibilities it represents may no longer be viable, Urdu continues to play a significant role in the lives of many of Indians. Chughtai's work in Urdu continues to resonate with audiences. For example, in the suburb of Mumbra, on the outskirts of Mumbai, a women's library called the "Rehnuma Reading Club and Library Center"²⁷ holds monthly reading group meetings to discuss selected works of Urdu literature. Chughtai is reportedly one of the members' favorite authors. One woman reports, "her stories are so fresh and funny, she could be writing today. [...] Many of the characters are exactly like my neighbors in Mumbra." Women from the book club stage plays based on Chughtai's stories as a way of reaching out to the community more broadly. A young actress named Tabassum says, "Through the play, I want to change the image of Mumbra—that

27 The library is supported by the NGO *Awaaz-e Niswan* (*Āvāz-e Nisvān*, Women's Voice), and, in addition to books, provides legal counsel for women and programs for victims of domestic abuse.

Conclusion

girls who live here are backward, and that people are not progressive.” The term “progressive” continues to carry cultural currency and inspire these women. In this space, Chughtai’s stories are read in Urdu and seen as representative of the issues faced by young women today.

By providing an in-depth study of Ismat Chughtai and her Progressive associates, the present dissertation aims to address this lacuna of voices outside of religious authorities within Indo-Muslim cultural studies and indeed attempts to broaden the scope of the field. The study of Muslim intellectuals who advocated for secular formations has either not been treated in, or treated as peripheral to, the field of Indo-Muslim cultural studies. It is my hope that there will be many more projects of the sort in order to open up possibilities for scholars of South Asian Islam beyond absolutist assertions of Islamic identity. I argue that Ismat Chughtai’s oeuvre provides a compelling example of a grounded Indo-Muslim secular, opening up possibilities to consider alternative secularisms and their historical genealogies in the Indian subcontinent.

Appendix 1: Timeline

| Year | Events in Ismat Chughtai's Life | National Events |
|------|---|---|
| 1900 | | British government in Northwestern Provinces and Oudh declares that it will employ both Perso-Arabic and Devanagari script. |
| 1901 | | |
| 1902 | | |
| 1903 | | Foundation of the Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū |
| 1904 | | |
| 1905 | | <i>Bihishtī Zavar</i> is published by Ashraf ‘Alī Thānavī |
| 1906 | | |
| 1907 | | |
| 1908 | | Nazīr Aḥmad founds journal <i>‘Iṣmat</i> ; death of Muḥammadī Begam. |
| 1909 | | Mohandas Gandhi publishes <i>Hind Swaraj</i> ; Muhammad Iqbal publishes <i>Shikwa</i> . |
| 1910 | | |
| 1911 | Ismat Chughtai's claimed year of birth in Badā'ūn | |
| 1912 | | |
| 1913 | Shahid Latif born in Chandausi. | Muhammad Iqbal publishes <i>Jawāb-e Shikwa</i> |
| 1914 | | |
| 1915 | Ismat Chughtai's "birth year" as it appears on official documents | |
| 1916 | | |
| 1917 | | Russian Revolution |
| 1918 | | |
| 1919 | | |
| 1920 | | Indian National Congress declares that Hindustani should be national language of India |
| 1921 | Family moves to Aligarh | |
| 1922 | | |
| 1923 | | Special Marriage Act amended to allow intercaste marriage |
| 1924 | | |
| 1925 | | Communist Party of India (CPI) established. |
| 1926 | | |
| 1927 | | |
| 1928 | Brother Azīm Beg publishes <i>Qur'ān aur Parda</i> | |
| 1929 | | Women vote in local elections for the first time; minimum age of marriage raised to fourteen |
| 1930 | | |
| 1931 | | |
| 1932 | Graduates from Aligarh Girls' School | Short story collection <i>Angāre</i> published. |
| 1933 | | <i>Angāre</i> proscribed by British government |
| 1934 | | Mirzā Farḥatullāh Beg publishes <i>Dilhī kī Ākhirī Shama'</i> |

Appendix 1: Timeline

| | | |
|------|--|---|
| 1935 | | |
| 1936 | Earns B.A.; attends First Progressive Writers' Conference in Lucknow | First Manifesto of the Progressive Writers' Movement |
| 1937 | | Jawaharlal Nehru writes "The Question of Language" |
| 1938 | First short story "Kāfir" published | Death of Muhammad Iqbal; Death of Sayyid Mumtaz Ali. |
| 1939 | Begins teaching in Jodhpur; publishes <i>Ziddī</i> | |
| 1940 | Story Gendā published in English translation | Ahmed Ali publishes <i>Twilight in Delhi</i> |
| 1941 | Salāhuddīn Aḥmad's review of Chughtai published in <i>Adabī Dunyā</i> ; moves to Bombay; first collection of short stories <i>Kaliyān</i> published. | |
| 1942 | Marriage to Shahid Latif; published "Liḥāf"; charged with obscenity | |
| 1943 | Publishes second collection of short stories <i>Choṭen</i> ; writes dialogue for the film <i>Chheḍ Chhāḍ</i> | |
| 1944 | Publishes <i>Ṭerḥī Lakīr</i> ; gives birth to daughter Seema; "Liḥāf" translated into English by K. A. Abbas | Sajjad Zaheer publishes "Hindī, Urdū, Hindūstānī kā maṣlah" |
| 1945 | Critic 'Azīz Aḥmad derides Chughtai's 'sex worship'; attends All-India Progressive Writers' Conference in Hyderabad | First All-India Writers' Conference in Jaipur |
| 1946 | Tried for obscenity with Manṭo in Lahore; publishes essay collection <i>Ek Bāt</i> . | |
| 1947 | | Indian and Pakistani Independence; Partition Violence; Progressive Writers' Office shifts to Bombay |
| 1948 | <i>Ziddi</i> released as a film starring Dev Anand | Ashk moves to Allahabad and founds Hindi publishing house Nīlābh Prakāśan |
| 1949 | Attends Progressive Writers' Conference in Bhopal; writes "Bamba'ī se Bhopāl tak" | New manifesto for Progressive Writers' Movement lambasts obscenity, suggests writers should describe peasant life |
| 1950 | Writes script for film Ārzū | Indian Constitution adopted |
| 1951 | | |
| 1952 | Gives birth to second daughter Subrina; publishes collection of essays entitled <i>Chū'ī Mū'ī</i> | |
| 1953 | | |
| 1954 | Attends International Council of Women conference in Helsinki | Sahitya Akademi established |
| 1955 | | |
| 1956 | | |
| 1957 | Ralph Russell translates "Nanhī kī Nānī" for Sahitya Akademi's <i>Contemporary Indian Short Stories</i> | |

Appendix 1: Timeline

| | | |
|------|---|---|
| 1958 | | |
| 1959 | | |
| 1960 | Publishes “Do Hāth”; <i>Ziddī</i> and selected short stories published in Hindi by Upendranath Ashk | |
| 1961 | | |
| 1962 | Publishes <i>Dil kī Duniyā</i> . | |
| 1963 | | |
| 1964 | | |
| 1965 | | ’65 Indo-Pakistani War |
| 1966 | Publishes collection of short stories <i>Do Hāth</i> | |
| 1967 | Husband Shahid Latif dies. | |
| 1968 | | |
| 1969 | | |
| 1970 | Publishes short memoir <i>Ghubār-e Kāravān</i> in <i>Ājkal</i> | |
| 1971 | Chughtai publishes “Urdū kā rasm al- <u>khatt</u> badal diyā jā’e” | ’71 Indo-Pakistani War; Bangladesh Liberation Movement |
| 1972 | | |
| 1973 | Writes story for film <i>Garam Havā</i> . | |
| 1974 | | |
| 1975 | | State of Emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in the face of massive political opposition |
| 1976 | Receives Padma śrī award; visits Pakistan; publishes <i>Ek Qaṭra-e Khūn</i> | |
| 1977 | | State of Emergency lifted |
| 1978 | Visits USSR. | |
| 1979 | <i>Kāghazī Hai Pairahan</i> begin to be published in <i>Ājkal</i> ; appears on-screen in movie <i>Junoon</i> ; publishes essay “Taraqqī Pasand Adab aur Main” | |
| 1980 | | |
| 1981 | | |
| 1982 | Wins <i>Soviet Land</i> magazine’s Nehru award | |
| 1983 | Travels to Moscow. “Muqaddas Farz” is published. | |
| 1984 | | |
| 1985 | | Shah Bano Judgment issued by Supreme Court of India |
| 1986 | | Ratification of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act |
| 1987 | Publishes last story “Mokha” | |
| 1988 | | |
| 1989 | | |
| 1990 | | |
| 1991 | Dies in Bombay; body cremated. | Beginning of economic liberalization of India. |

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